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The Dark Cedar Forest

& Other Stories

Robert MacLeod

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in

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ABSTRACT

The Dark Cedar Forest & Other Stories

Robert MacLeod

The stories in this thesis are set in rural Ontario, and are linked by a fictional village and one central family. The MacMillans, the family on whose experience most of the stories are based, are an actual family; consequently, one problem has been to transform reality into fiction. The stories explore the emotions of adults and the maturation of children.

The Dark Cedar Forest

& Other Stories

Thanks to Gladys Carlyle MacLeod

who loved stories and reading.

Contents

Below Zero

On very cold mornings, his wife sometimes had to remind him. "Brad, it's way below zero," Alice would say. "Maybe you'd better hitch the horse to the cutter and drive the kids to school today." She was more sensitive to the sudden drops in temperature than he. Working all day in the bush, cutting wood to be left to dry through the spring and summer months for the next winter's fuel, he had become more accustomed to the cold. Yesterday afternoon there had been a sudden drop in temperature, and swirling, lashing winds. The three of his children who walked home from the elementary school in the village had frostbite on their faces. He was angry at himself that he hadn't thought to leave the bush early and drive them home.

Alice had punished him for his neglect by short answers, long silences and fussing over the children. Her coldness would last only a day at the most. He wanted to describe the woods to her, make her understand why he hadn't felt the cold. There was no wind in the middle of the forest where he cut wood. The tall dark cedars which encircled the clearing gave it a warmth of its own. The team had stood quietly, content under heavy blankets, and he had sawed and chopped until he was sweating, glancing up occasionally as partridges flew noisily overhead. He knew they were waiting for him to leave so that they could settle in the cedars. He wanted to describe the warmth and silence

to her, but he did not. That would not lessen her anger nor remove the frostbite.

This morning the kitchen windows were completely iced and frosted over, admitting almost no light. If anything, he thought, it's colder than yesterday. He had already harnessed the bay hackney driving mare and noticed how reluctantly she stepped outside, and left the two large work horses in the comfort of the stable. He stopped the cutter at the kitchen door and went inside to see that the children were ready.

As he picked up the reins, he saw Alice peering through the partly opened door, making sure he had sense enough to cover the children with the blanket. He looked angrily at the door before he urged the mare forward.

The hydro wires crackled and hissed, singing in the icy air over the soft swish of the wooden runners in the snow. He turned to look at the back of the cutter where the children were stowed, completely hidden under the old brown horse blanket. In the school yard, he swung the horse in a wide arc, turning her to the homeward direction, and stopped near the cement steps. Under the steps was a sloping three-sided room the size of a large closet, where the children who had bicycles parked them out of the rain in the spring and fall.

Then he saw them, and he had almost missed seeing them,

huddled in the corner against the cement wall, stamping their feet to keep their toes from freezing, and close together for warmth. Their breath rose slowly, like the funneling smoke from the chimneys of the houses he had passed. As he stared at them, they reminded him of the red and white heifers he'd left outside in the pasture as late as possible to save on the winter's feed supply. Caught in an overnight blizzard before he'd herded them inside, they huddled against the barn for warmth, tails between their legs, backs hunched, heads lowered, and steaming breath rising from their frosted, icy nostrils.

These were the Hanson children, five of them. None with mitts or scarves. The two older children, without toques, had their hands over their ears, while the younger children had their hands stuffed deeply in their pockets and their toques pulled low.

Bradley imagined them running across the fields in a mile and a half shortcut to keep warm. "How long have you been here?" he asked, fixing his eyes on the oldest, a boy with spiked red hair, chafed red skin, and dripping nose.

The boy drew his coat sleeve slowly across his nose and replied, "Since before eight o'clock."

"Why aren't you inside where it's warm?"

"She don't unlock the door till a quarter to nine."

"What time does she get here?"

"Before eight o'clock," Willy piped from under the horse blanket.

Bradley mounted the steps two at a time and hammered the double wooden door with both his fists, but it opened only a crack.

"What do you want?" the voice demanded sharply. Suddenly the door opened further. "Oh, it's you, Bradley."

He stared at her, this sophisticated, gray-haired woman who had taught for over thirty years. This principal of the two-room school and respected member of the community. He ploughed her garden each spring and she paid him well for the work.

Still he said nothing, and she stood there impatiently, in her gray wool skirt and white angora sweater. He thought of his own old winter barn coat, with the bottom button missing, the frayed collar, and tobacco juice stains on the right sleeve where he had wiped the juice from the corners of his mouth. He knew what the coat looked like, but he resisted the urge to look down at it.

Now she was shivering from the blast of freezing air, and the coffee in the red thermos top cup she held in her right hand ceased to steam. Irritated at the silence and cold, she repeated sharply, as if speaking to one of her students, "What do you want, Bradley? I'm not standing here all day."

"I want this door unlocked every morning at eight,"

he said fiercely.

"I don't have to unlock before eight forty-five," she snapped. "That's school law."

"Com'on woman, what's wrong with you? Have you got no heart? Those kids are here before eight o'clock every morning. You know damn well how far they walk."

"They don't have to be here that early. I'm not having them in the classroom causing a ruckus and pushing and fighting before eight forty-five."

"But they do get here before eight, and they can stay in the cloakroom. It's plenty big enough and separate from your classroom. Just close your door."

"They definitely cannot!" she said and turned to dismiss him, as if the conversation were ended.

"If this door isn't unlocked at eight o'clock, days it's below zero, I'll chop it open with my axe. Just you see if I don't!"

Her jaw dropped, the colour drained from her face, and her posture stiffened. "Do that, and I'll call the chairman of the school board!"

"After I chop the door open, I'll go to see the goddamn chairman of the school board. I know him too, and we'll see if this door's kept open or not."

The children were now all standing at the bottom of the steps, witnessing the exchange. Bradley held the door open wide and the blast of air drove the shivering teacher

into her classroom. As she slammed her classroom door shut, Bradley ordered the children inside.

He walked to the cutter in long slow strides, holding his head high in spite of the lashing wind. The inside heat had melted the frost and ice on the window panes, probably because she had turned the furnace very high when she arrived. He felt her glaring at him through her classroom windows. He knew she was there, staring him angrily out of her school yard. Instead of sitting on the front driver's seat, he stood with his feet planted firmly on the floor boards and his legs slightly apart for balance. The bay mare was tensed, ready to bolt home to the warmth of the stable at his first touch on the reins. When he grabbed the reins, he drew them tight to hold her in check. Then he gathered the long black leather ends in his right hand and, the teacher still staring, he lashed the mare's hind quarters so that she leapt into a wild gallop.

In Times of Crisis

Alice is going to die, Bradley thought, and each time he had this thought, his legs felt weak, his stomach churned and his throat constricted. He forced himself not to cry, not even to let his eyes water. She must not know he was worried and the children must not know either. The pain she had to deal with was enough; she must not see any weakness in him.

His mother-in-law arrived to take two-year-old Allan until after the operation. He left her alone with her daughter, who lay on the livingroom sofa, now her bed because it was downstairs and near the bathroom. He went outside to split wood. She came out of the house leading Allan by the hand and carrying a brown shopping-bag which contained his clothes. A strand of hair had fallen over her forehead, and he noticed how much she resembled her daughter. The similarity jarred him. The same delicate facial features, the same eyes. Only hers were not wracked with pain. They were worried, warm and motherly.

"Bradley," she said.

But before she could continue, all the pent-up emotion in him burst.

"She's going to die, I know she is." His eyes watered and he felt himself sobbing uncontrollably like a child. "Only thirty years old and she's going to die."

"You'll have to control yourself, Bradley. You don't

know that she's going to die. The doctor didn't tell you that."

Bradley regained his self-control. His eyes still welled with tears, but he stopped sobbing as quickly as he had started.

Her voice softened now, but she spoke deliberately and emphatically, with the conviction of an older, experienced person. "In times of crisis, don't think the worst you can, think the best. Keep the good things in mind. The surgeon is one of the best in the province. Fortunately, you've got Blue Cross to pay all the hospital and doctor bills. And in spite of that tumour, she's young and has always been healthy. She's given you five children. Hope for the best, and try not to think of the worst. The worst will not likely happen. That doesn't mean I'm not worried too. God knows I am. She's my only daughter. All we can do is pray and hope for the best."

Bradley turned and picked up the axe to continue his work.

"Do you want me to stay?" she asked kindly.

"No, no, you go ahead. We'll be okay. I'll telephone from the hospital."

The hospital — he'd been there only yesterday, and he had maintained his self-control then.

The doctor had been with Alice for two hours before he called Bradley from the hospital waiting-room into his

office. "Well, it's not another baby, Bradley," he said, "so you can't be held responsible." He smiled and Bradley returned his smile sheepishly because he thought he was expected to smile. The doctor paused and Bradley sat there awkwardly, wishing he were at home on the farm, in his barn clothes, with familiar, every-day problems he was used to dealing with — a broken wagon axle, a lame horse, a difficult animal birth — anything but this. The doctor, he thought, was [illegible]ching for the right words.

"The X-ray shows a tumour as large as a football. I wish I could tell you more, but I just cannot. Frankly I've never seen anything like this before. The only way we'll know more is by operating. Try not to worry Alice. Just keep her comfortable, and have her here tomorrow at eight o'clock in the morning. We'll operate at one. She has pain pills and sleeping pills. Make sure she rests well this afternoon and tonight."

Bradley continued to split wood for a half hour. Slowly at first, with jerky movements, and his hands trembling as he picked up each new block to split it. Gradually his swinging of the axe became rhythmic and his movements quickened. He could feel the perspiration under his armpits and his body warmed to a full sweat. He realized the work had settled his body and his mind. After looking

at the mounting pile of split wood, he drove the axe blade deeply into the old gray chopping block and left it there for another time.

Alice turned her head and opened her eyes as he entered the livingroom. No, she didn't need him to help her to the bathroom, she said. As he watched her shift her body slightly, he forced himself not to look at her stomach which swelled under the cover as if she were nine months pregnant.

"Just pull the cover down over my feet," she whispered weakly.

Her legs and feet were swollen. He wanted to touch them, massage them to their normal size. But he brushed aside the desire and tucked the blanket under her feet.

Then she looked at him evenly, accusingly.

"I wish my mother, not yours, was keeping the girls," she said. "When is it they're going?"

"I'll drive them back tonight after milking."

"God, I hate to leave them back there in that house. It'll be like being in a damned church, and they aren't used to her."

"Well, there was nothing I could do," Bradley replied. "She phoned before your mother did, and I couldn't really say no when she offered to keep them. What could I say?"

"Oh, Bradley, just forget it!" she moaned. "I'm so sick I can't even think about it. I don't care. I feel as

if I've got a fifty pound sack of cement in my stomach."

She closed her eyes and turned her head sideways on the pillow to face the back of the sofa.

Bradley walked down the hospital corridor beside Alice. She smiled weakly, but her eyes were without expression, concentrating on what she had to face alone. He stopped at the entrance to the operating room, knowing he could not enter, and then he walked slowly, in a daze, back to the waiting-room.

It would be a three or four hour wait, the doctor had told him, before Alice would be wheeled from the recovery room to her own room. The doctor suggested he go home and return in a couple of hours. After staying in the waiting room a half hour, he could no longer endure the slow movement of the minute hand on the wall clock, the strange faces, and his own constraining Sunday clothes. He had allowed Willy to stay home from school to tend the farm that day. Ricky would soon be home from school, and the two of them would do the evening milking. Maybe he'd go home just for an hour, he thought, check on Willy and help them get started on the chores. Then he'd return.

As soon as he drove into the driveway, Willy was outside at the car door.

"Wendy and Sandra've been crying since eleven o'clock. She phoned and told me you'd better come back and get them.

They wouldn't eat lunch, she said. And it's almost three o'clock now. You'd better go and get them. I'll stay home with them — don't leave them back there."

The girls were sitting at the kitchen table with their heads on their arms, still crying when Bradley walked into his mother's house. His mother looked very frustrated, her stern face drawn tighter than ever.

"Com'on, we're going home," he said, and grabbed the brown suitcase which stood near the door. The girls jumped from their chairs and rushed ahead of him to the car.

Only when they were in the car did he really notice the details of his daughters' appearance. Both had red puffy eyes and tear-stained cheeks. Their hair, which was usually long and straight or braided, was in elaborate swirling curls. Wendy had her hair held in place by a wide blue ribbon, and Sandra, by a white one. Both wore their best Sunday dresses, white knee stockings and black shoes. As soon as they were in the car they pulled the ribbons from their hair and stopped crying.

"We wanted to wear our everyday clothes," five-year-old Wendy explained, "and play outside. But she made us bathe and she washed and curled our hair and made us sit at the table all day. We couldn't get up from our chairs and walk around or anything. We just had a bath and washed our hair yesterday. We told her that, but she washed it again

and put curls in it. We hate curls." She paused breathless and angry.

Four-year-old Sandra picked up where her sister left off. "So we fixed her. We decided to cry as long as we had to stay there. We would have cried for a month."

Bradley's anger grew slowly, like a black approaching storm. He wheeled the car in the direction of his mother-in-law's farm. She would know how to care for the girls. As he drove, his anger increased. He thought of all the times he had wanted to tell his mother off. She always did everything just the way she wanted — never a care for anyone else's feelings. She had had a mean religious streak all her life. This time he'd really let her have it. The first chance he got. He'd let her have it with both barrels — tell her what he'd thought of her all his life. It was about time somebody set her straight. Her and her damned stiff-faced, straight-laced religion. If she was a man, he'd hit her. He'd put her in her place once and for all. It was about time somebody did.

Bradley was still seething with anger when the doctor met him outside Alice's room.

"Just brought her back, Bradley. She's fine. She'll be as good as ever in a few weeks. That tumour was the damnedest size though — it weighed ten pounds. But it came out clean, and I'm sure, just by the look of it, that

it's not malignant. A doctor can usually tell by its appearance. Of course, I've sent it away to a pathologist, to be certain. We always do. But I don't think there's any need to worry now."

Bradley sat by Alice's bed. She looked just as if she were sleeping. She even looked younger now, he thought, not much older than when she had married him twelve years ago. He thought about the size of the tumour. How could it grow so quickly inside her in a matter of three months?

He realized that he was calm now, and remembered he had raged against his mother. It was a good thing he had not actually gone back to her house. All the hatred had left, like the swift departure of a summer storm. He wondered that he could suddenly feel so good and so relieved. The relief that the greatest crisis in his life was resolved seemed to remove all his hatred. He wondered that he could be moved to such raging explosive anger — actually wanting to slug his mother.

He stared at Alice resting so peacefully. She'd be angry when she learned of his mother's treatment of the girls. She was bound to find out the first time she saw the girls. He couldn't prevent it. They were such little blabber-mouths, those two. He smiled at the thought of them.

Yes, he had it — a flash of inspiration. He'd tell

Alice how Wendy and Sandra really put it over on the old lady. How they had purposefully cried to get their own way. He imagined them taking turns crying once they both tired of it — Sandra kicking Wendy under the table to take up renewed fits of crying when she became tired, and the two of them continuing this way all day. Yes, that was it.. Get Alice to laugh at the idea that, for once, the old lady met her match. By God, Alice, he'd laugh, I bet that's the first time in her life she's encountered a situation she couldn't handle. You should have seen the defeated look on her face. It was worth anything to see. You should have been there when I walked into that kitchen and saw the look on her face.

Country Ways

Miriam was hanging clothes on the line when John drove the sweating team from the field where he'd been mowing hay. As she took the clothespins from the corner of her mouth to pin the sheets securely, she wondered whether John was still sullen and resentful, or whether the day's work in the intense heat had softened him.

He had been punishing her since Saturday, two days ago, when she had unexpectedly been offered a teaching position. She was certain he would agree with her reasons for wanting to work, but she'd been wrong. Perhaps the timing was bad. In the planting and harvest seasons he became remote, work seeming to form a hard impenetrable shell about him.

As Miriam picked up the empty laundry basket and turned, the humid breeze billowed her white cotton dress, which seemed intent on chasing the flapping sheets and sailing her far from the farm.

She walked toward the barnyard where John paused to let the horses drink from the cement water tank. To her right was the milkhouse and the split, piled wood with the bark on each stick drying to a hard, brittle shell. She looked at the large weather-blackened block of wood used for decapitating fowl. It stood near the woodpile, several feet from the milkhouse and a short

distance from the house, long grass flourishing at its base. The axe blade was lodged in the wood, its polished oak handle pointing slightly upward in the slanting rays of the afternoon sun. A few gray and white feathers, glued with the last victim's blood, clung tenaciously to the block. Leading four-year-old Mary Ann by the hand, Miriam walked in a wide arc around the ominous block.

"It's a good breeze for drying hay," she called, but John answered with only a nod and led the team into the coolness of the stable.

"I'll be going to that sale in Chesterton after all, since I've finished the mowing," he announced as he passed into the back porch of the house. Miriam, who was several steps behind him, went upstairs and laid out clean overalls and a denim shirt.

She would have to milk the cows alone, but she was not to lift the heavy milk cans into the cement cooling tanks. He would do that when he returned at about ten-thirty. And if any hobos approached the farm from the railway tracks she could just set the dog on them.

She stood in the bedroom door, keeping the distance between them she thought his tone warranted, and watching as he changed clothes. John was tall and sinewy, a bit stoop-shouldered from carelessness of posture and long hours of labour. As he sat on the corner of the bed

lacing his boots, his thick black hair tumbled carelessly over his forehead and ears.

"Maybe you should get your hair cut in town and shave before you leave."

His gray eyes fixed on her momentarily from his sharp-featured, sunburned face. "Haven't got time, and who's to care anyway? There'll just be farmers there."

She knew his sarcasm was a consequence of their quarrel. She also knew they couldn't afford to buy anything at the sale. Not wanting to alienate him further, she kept these thoughts to herself. She was sure he was brooding about her — a city girl he could never completely mould to country ways.

"Still," she said, ignoring his remark and trying to appeal to the thrifty side of his nature, "you may not be in town again for a while and you wouldn't have to waste gas on a special trip later for a haircut. And in this hot weather, you'd be more comfortable with your hair cut short."

John didn't reply.

Her fear of being left alone on the farm, especially at night, far from any neighbour, recurred.

"Why don't they have these farm auction sales starting about ten in the morning? Then you'd be here for

milking. I don't like leaving Mary Ann in the house alone while I milk."

"They'd never get the farmers to leave haying all day. Have a poor crowd in that case. Mary Ann'll be all right. Like I already told you, just don't take her to the barn 'cause she might get kicked. Put her to sleep, and then do the milking."

Miriam followed him to the truck. He glanced sideways before starting it, his tired gray eyes focusing on her. "You'll do all right. Just see Snowball don't kick over the milkpail. She's a kicker, and she don't know you. And be sure you strip them all clean."

She said good-bye as he started the motor, but he did not hear and drove down the gravel lane leaving two long parallel clouds of slowly ascending dust in his wake. She watched until the clouds became one and disappeared.

"Just strip them all clean," she muttered. "Why couldn't he have said good-bye, shown some feeling?"

She sat on the porch steps, thinking. How his speech grated on her sense of grammatical correctness. After they were married, she tried to discourage him from saying "he don't," "he ain't" and "I seen." At first he looked hurt and then defiant, like a pupil she might have scolded unfairly or too harshly. She was

immediately sorry she'd hurt his pride. Although she loved him more intensely at that moment, with the pained, bewildered look in his eyes, she couldn't understand why he wouldn't want to speak correctly. She felt like holding him gently to assuage the hurt, but she knew instinctively that she had to let his hard defiant exterior dissipate of its own accord. Warmth and gentleness would only cause a more complete withdrawal.

Perhaps what he needed now was some time away from her, time with the other farmers in town, "time out" to deal with his anger and let it subside. "Time out," she mused, was a pedagogical expression for coping with an obstinate, angry pupil. But didn't she also need "time out" — away from the farm and work? She felt a sudden, gnawing resentment that he didn't consider or understand her needs.

She had bent to his needs from the first. When she had met him six years ago in the city, he wanted to leave the city, with its heavy traffic and noise, and live on a farm where life was tranquil — where he'd be his own boss. He was working in the city only to earn enough for the down payment on a farm. She thought he was romantic and dreamy — a wonderful combination — and gave up her teaching position to marry him and share his dream. Sitting on the steps now, recalling their lost warmth

and closeness, she felt weak and empty.

She remembered the visit from the Chairman of the Farland Public School Board Saturday morning and almost wished he hadn't sought her out. Would she consider teaching in the village school? Before letting her answer, he offered an incentive: she would be filling the position vacated by the principal. He had heard that she'd taught for several years in the city and was close to completing her B.A. The School Board wanted someone with city experience and preferred a member of the community. It would even raise the salary to attract her. She had said she was interested (she remembered trying to conceal her excitement), but she would have to discuss the offer with her husband.

The job would be a return to the work she loved. It would get her partially away from the farm and involved in the community. It would not be a return to the city, but it was a good alternative. Perhaps if she wasn't around John all the time, their relationship would be better. She longed for a change, even if it meant only going to Farland to work each day. Her salary would raise their standard of living. She had gradually realized farming would doom them to near poverty.

"I could still do all the house work and help with

the chores," she had pleaded with John over supper. "I walked over to see Alice MacMillan and she's agreed to babysit Mary Ann. Her Wendy is the same age, and it would be good for Mary Ann to have another child to play with."

"You had no damned business going all the way over to Alice MacMillan's and supposen you'd go to work. No wife of mine is gonna be out working. There's enough for you to do here already. Do you think I can't afford to keep you?"

"But John, the extra money would mean we wouldn't have to be so poor, always cutting corners, not buying new clothes. You could buy better machinery and hire a man to help you during the summer. You wouldn't always look so tired. Maybe we could even get electricity and a telephone."

"We ain't that goddamned poor! You're a farmer's wife and you're not working. And the sooner you get that through your thick, educated head, the better!" John stormed out of the house, leaving his supper only partly eaten. It would do her as much good talking to him again about the job, she concluded bitterly, as it would talking to a block of wood.

After supper Mary Ann followed her as she fed and

watered the pigs and hens. Mary Ann trailed behind, carefully carrying the basket of afternoon eggs. Miriam paused to check the garden for ripe tomatoes and to inspect the potato plants for bugs. She smiled to herself. Wouldn't her teacher friends in the city be amused if they could see her now, checking potato plants for bugs!

At seven she let the impatient cows in the back stable door, knowing she was already an hour late. Getting Mary Ann settled and sleepy had taken longer than she'd expected. If she hurried, perhaps she'd still be finished before dark. When she was finished and locked in the house until John returned, she'd feel safer.

She tried to blot out the unsolved sickle murder of a farm woman two years earlier near Chesterton, but she could not. The woman had also been left alone to do the milking at night, and when her husband returned, he found her body mutilated with a corn sickle. John knew she was still afraid; yet he'd left her alone to milk for the first time.

She disengaged the two cows she had just milked from their stanchions, and poured the overturned hubcap full of milk for the cats and dog. A pail of milk

in each hand, she walked toward the milkhouse, which was about fifty feet from the barn and a hundred from the house. She looked apprehensively at the axe, now pointing directly at the sun which was setting, a livid bloody red, and she fantasized the distance to the house in long striding steps.

Standing on the milkhouse steps, waiting for the first pail of milk to strain, she touched her red milking kerchief. Peaked by her hair, wasn't it a bit like the rooster's comb? The same colour at least. She glanced at the axe and shuddered.

John had said she should learn how to kill a chicken. She had watched as he twisted and interlocked the large rooster's wings. To prevent flapping, he explained. He held the legs with his left hand and from high over his head brought the axe swiftly down with his right on the neck of the rooster, whose eye was staring widely, expectantly on the block, his great regal ruby comb, jelly soft, against the hard black wood.

With a quick sweep of the axe blade he brushed the head from the block and at the same time freed the rooster from his left hand. The bird danced a mad drunken dance about the yard, headless, wings pinned, until neck and breast feathers were soaked with blood.

Then it flopped about in the grass, and at last ceased to bleed. Miriam yelled "Scat!" at the barn cats which waited impatiently, staring at the head, licking their lips. Shaken by the spectacle and John's insensitivity to the rooster's plight, she turned abruptly and went into the house.

John had plucked the bird in the barn, but insisted she gut it. She followed his instructions, but her hands slipped awkwardly and she held her head sideways, away from the warm choking stench.

"Is there no easier, kinder way to kill them?" she asked, scrubbing her hands with a bar of Alice MacMillan's homemade lye soap, thinking it was strong enough to remove the skin from her hands.

"My grandfather used to wring their necks. Just snapped them off. But there's a knack to that. And my grandmother used to close the back door on their neck and give a helluva pull at the same time."

Miriam remembered the delight in his eyes as she winced at his stories.

Before returning to the barn, she patted the top of her kerchief and decided to retie it more tightly. What if she were surprised and killed by the maniac, killed with the axe John left in the yard, killed like a

rooster? The maniac could still be in the area, a seemingly normal person who might go berserk again. Nobody knew for sure the murderer was a deranged vagrant who fled the region. Maybe one of the men at the sale, seeing John there alone, knowing she was at home alone ...

She lit the lantern. The barn was now dark inside. As she finished the sixth cow, the cats stared eerily from the darkness. She could see only their green eyes. The cows, restless and anxious to be milked, moved nervously in anticipation of abandoning her and joining the other five which had long since trailed to the pasture.

She leaned her red kerchiefed head sideways against the warm flank, hoping to calm the animal. The animal warmth was soothing. She avoided the cats' eyes and concentrated on the milk squirting and hissing rhythmically in the aluminum pail.

If only they had not met Bradley and Alice MacMillan at the grocery store Saturday night. Farmers did their weekly shopping in Farland on either Friday or Saturday evening when the store remained open until ten. If there was no community dance or other social event, the outing of the week was the shopping. Farmers milked early and more quickly, dressed up, and went to the village to shop

leisurely and exchange news. A social outing, she mused.

How different from her Saturday evening excursions to the Glen Lea Country Club in the city! She had gone there dancing every Saturday night with a group of single teachers. They sat at one of the larger tables, drinking slowly, listening to the band, joking about work, and watching the couples dancing. They were times she liked to remember — friendly and mellow, a release from the confining routines of school.

Turning to a light touch on her shoulder, she had seen John for the first time. Would she dance with him, he'd asked. She paused as she usually did on such occasions, as if deciding — an act, she remembered now, designed to make the man think she just didn't get up and dance with anyone who happened to ask her. It was also a moment to size up the man and perhaps think of a plausible excuse to decline his offer. When she noticed John's shyness and apparent regret that he had dared venture away from his two friends and taken a chance on her refusing, she flashed a welcoming smile.

The first dance was awkward, but by the second, he relaxed. By carefully worded questions and just the right smile and expression, she encouraged him to talk, drew him out of his shyness and self-consciousness. He was tall, lean, tanned, and dark-haired — an outdoor

man — the type she fantasized.

She marveled now at how well she could suit herself to a situation, be a different person as circumstances required.

It had at first been difficult to assume the role of the Saturday evening farmer's wife doing her weekly shopping. She played the role well now, but it didn't help her when she met Bradley and Alice in the store on Saturday evening. She should've anticipated the meeting, but she couldn't really blame them for the direction the conversation had taken. After all, they were only trying to be neighbourly.

"So I hear Wendy's getting a new friend," Bradley had remarked, looking at Mary Ann, and addressing John.

"You're so lucky to be able to get away from the house," Alice said, as if the acceptance of the job was a certainty. "Sometimes I think I've spent my whole life in the kitchen. You don't have to worry about Mary Ann, she'll be no trouble at all. We'll get along just fine."

"Don't let Alice over-charge you for babysitting," Bradley joked. "It's hardly what you'd call work at all."

He turned to John. "You're sure lucky to be putting your wife out to work." He winked at John good naturedly. "I wish I could get rid of Alice for a while — ship her

out to work. Every woman oughta work, just to see what it's like."

Although John had smiled at Bradley, Miriam noticed his body stiffen. He glanced sharply at her, indicating he held her responsible for meeting the MacMillans. She felt sure John's pride was hurt by the neighbours' perception that he was putting her to work to help support the family. If only she hadn't been so presumptuous, if only she'd persuaded John before making arrangements with Alice.

As Miriam finished stripping the seventh cow, her fingers ached. Usually she milked the four easiest cows slowly, watching Mary Ann, while John quickly and expertly milked the other eight.

She noticed the barn was darker now, and sitting on the stool by the eighth cow, she could see the wall of darkness beyond the open back stable door. Thinking of the bloody sickle, she milked more quickly, her temples pounding and her ear trained on the front door for any unusual sound. The dog lay in the corner near the back door through which the cows stepped into the barnyard. She worried less about that door, and she didn't care that she hadn't stripped the eighth cow dry. On jerky legs, she rose and released the cows she had just milked, not

once letting the front door out of sight. The dog leaped and nipped the heels of the passing cows, forcing them to rush into the night.

A pail of milk in each hand, so as not to appear unnatural if she was being watched, she called to the dog who, feeling his day's work didn't include following her, rose reluctantly, and sank lazily into the corner. She turned up the wick and placed the lantern beside the front door. Pausing, she peered left and right before stepping quickly into the darkness and walking to the milkhouse. Her eyes swept the dark night and the milkhouse, but she couldn't see any movement or the chopping block.

She poured the milk into the strainer and banged the strainer loudly on the top of the milk can — lifted it high and slammed it down angrily to make the milk strain faster and to prove to herself everything was all right.

As she stood there, she looked through the milkhouse window. At that moment the moon sailed clear of a cloud. She could see the outline of the chopping block, but not the axe, and she was sure a tall wavering shadow retreated behind the woodpile.

Her temples pounded wildly and her legs weakened as if they wouldn't support her. She banged the strainer again, defying the shadowy figure to come near her, and

looked once more through the window. Fireflies danced about the chopping block and the woodpile in a mad staccato dance, but she couldn't see the block, for the moon had taken refuge behind a massive cloud.

She took the key from her pocket and quietly placed the milk pails outside, as if she were going to return to the barn to finish milking. Perhaps whoever was stalking her would think she was going to the house only for a moment, just to check on something. After taking a dozen calculated, ordinary steps, she rushed on tiptoe, in long striding steps, the key clutched firmly in her right hand — ready.

She locked the kitchen door behind her and, grabbing the iron stove poker, made her way slowly and quietly through the livingroom and up the stairs. Groping in the darkness, she reached Mary Ann's room and gathered the sleeping child in her blanket. For a moment, she thought wildly about what she should do next. If only they owned a rifle. Perhaps the murderer would think they did, or perhaps he would think she'd hidden in the cellar. She tiptoed across the hall and into her bedroom. She closed the door, propped a chair under the handle, and approached the closet. After placing Mary Ann on the floor in the back of the closet, she crouched beside the child. The poker handle was wet and slippery

from her sweating palm, but she grasped it firmly.

Her throat was dry, her temples throbbed, and her heart pounded. She tried to listen for strange noises in the night, but the sounds of her own body obscured them.

Later, how much later she could not determine, for her sense of time had become distorted, she heard steps below, heavy steps on the stairs, and then the chair crash to the floor.

When the door swung open she screamed — shrieked like a terrified, wounded animal, and lunged, slashing the air with the poker. Her arm was caught, held fast in a steel grip and the poker clattered to the floor.

She stood still, her eyes wide and hysterical, and shouted at him. "The axe is gone from the chopping block! It's not there! There's someone behind the woodpile!"

"No, it's still there," John said gently. "Get a hold of yourself! I walked past it when I brought the lantern in from the barn."

The lantern was on the floor to his right, and Mary Ann, whimpering and wide-eyed, clung to his right leg. Although Miriam shook and sobbed convulsively, she noticed how anxious and frightened his face was in the lantern light. His hair was cut very short, making him

appear boyish and vulnerable. As she stared at him, he trembled and his eyes welled with tears. She stood there amazed, until he drew her gently toward him.

The Matriarch

Sunday was Elizabeth MacMillan's day of contemplation. She sat quietly—erect, aloof, and proud—at the kitchen table and thought about God. Always she measured herself in God's eyes by what she had accomplished and what was hers. God, she was certain, approved of order, cleanliness and industry. She looked over her shoulder through the door at her livingroom which was a testimony to God. She was the only one who spent any time in that room. The sun, approving of her work, filtered gently through the white sheers on the plushness of the burgundy sofa and matching armchairs. The rich dark mahogany tables and chairs bore no scratches from careless children's toys, nor were there ever finger-prints or smudges on their freshly polished surfaces. She marvelled that the oriental carpet, which she had paid a thousand dollars for in spite of her husband's objection, maintained its colours and just-bought appearance after ten years. The border was a lighter wine colour than her sofa and chairs. It was a perfect colour for the room, she thought, and on the beige background the design of intertwining violet flowers which worked its way to the centre was a complement to her own flowers. Each window sill contained humble red clay pots of delicate African violets which thrived under her care. She was sure God loved the

profusion of fragile white, pink, mauve and purple flowers on the soft moss-textured leaves as much as she did.

Elizabeth's thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a car in the driveway and children's voices. She went to the window and looked out at her son Bradley, his wife, and children. Through the screen, she could hear Alice warning the children to play outside and not to dare walk in the flower-beds or break any flowers. At least the woman knew her place.

The grandfather clock ticked loudly from the living-room into the kitchen where they sat, measuring the time slowly, accentuating the silences when conversation failed. Her husband Harold rocked slowly, rhythmically, in time with the ticking, in his corner of the kitchen, drawing contentedly on his pipe, from time to time breaking the silence to question or answer Bradley about farm work. She knew Harold was more talkative and active outside the house, but the house was her domain — Sunday, her day.

Elizabeth sat dignified yet relaxed on her chair at the kitchen table, a comfortable distance from the whiffs of smoke. Questions and answers between her and Alice, mainly about gardening, were brief. She watched Alice look around the kitchen as she habitually did on these visits. What a difference the woman must notice! The

shining black and white tile floor, the white refrigerator and electric stove, the immaculate white walls and the white cupboards with their black trim. Alice's kitchen floor was covered with a gaudy patterned linoleum worn and scuffed in heavy traffic areas. Elizabeth imagined the finger-prints on the windows and doors and saw the old black wood stove on which Alice still cooked. Her kitchen ceiling was probably smoked or sooty above the [illegible]ve.

As Elizabeth looked at the woman, she knew she must tolerate her, but she could never love this daughter-in-law. She sat too carelessly on her chair, her house would never have that cleanliness and order which were the Lord's, and the woman seldom went to church. She probably sent the children to Sunday School only to have a rest from them. But Alice and Bradley had gone to church every Sunday when they had lived those first two years in her house — she had insisted that they go. Even two weeks after Ricky was born, Elizabeth remembered she'd sent Alice and Bradley to church. Having given birth after only six months of marriage, Alice needed to be in church praying more than she did. She herself had stayed home and kept the baby, but she read the Bible and prayed at home then, as she did now. She no longer went to church. God was here with her in her house more

so than He was in church — she felt His presence as surely as she did her own.

No, she could never love Alice. But she was pleasant to her because of Ricky whom she had raised herself for two years and kept during every school vacation. She loved Ricky as much as her own children. No, even more, she thought. She tried to subdue her resentment for Alice. It was Alice, she was certain, who pressured Bradley to leave the home farm and buy his own farm fifteen miles away in Farland. The move had taken Ricky from her and had necessitated Harold hiring full-time help.

Elizabeth's mind went unwillingly to old Freddie McGregor, their hired man. She had wanted him fired for years. It was sinful to have someone like that in your house, it would seem to the Lord she approved of Freddie's sinful habits. He drank so much every Saturday night that he wet the bed. Harold refused to get rid of Freddie, arguing he'd never get another hand so good to stay and work. In a move of anger and frustation, she had put a rubber sheet on his bed. Now she suffered Freddie's presence and Harold's obstinacy on this one matter as a cross she had somehow to bear. The thought that she had a cross to bear made her feel stronger and even victorious over Freddie and Harold.

Elizabeth watched the children walk slowly and tentatively into the kitchen and stand around their father and mother. If Ricky had been with them, if Alice had not allowed him to go fishing with his friends instead of visiting her, she would have extended a warmer welcome to both parents and children.

"Willy got the highest average in his class this report card," Alice announced, looking proudly at her son.

"That's good," Elizabeth said. "How did Ricky do?"

"Well, not as good. The teacher says he don't apply himself."

"You bring him with you the next time, and I'll have a talk with him," Elizabeth said sternly, happy to have a pretext to get Ricky to visit. "Don't you forget," she insisted. "Tell him I want to see him and that he's to spend the summer holidays here as usual."

She reminded herself to put that new ten dollar bill in a birthday card and mail it to Ricky. Looking at the other five children, she realized that she didn't even know when their birthdays were. Well, she thought, if Bradley hadn't been so foolish and left home, I'd know his children better.

The ticking of the grandfather clock from the living-room marked the silence more than ever. Elizabeth noticed

the silence but didn't disturb it with further comment. She was waiting for Alice, who glanced occasionally at the electric clock on the kitchen wall, to decide they'd been there long enough to signal their departure with her customary: "Well, about the time we get home and you get your clothes changed, Brad, it'll be time to get the cows in for milking."

Elizabeth waited for this moment as anxiously as Alice did. She wanted her house to herself again, but she refused to make any movement which might suggest her desire to be alone or betray her impatience.

* * *

Elizabeth had not expected another Sunday visit from Alice and Bradley for at least a month — they had visited only two weeks ago. News of Freddie's Sunday morning death had reached them by noon that day, however, and they arrived without the children. Ricky was baby-sitting, they told her, and they had come to see if there was anything they could do. They did not fool her. They were only there out of curiosity.

When Harold had gone into Freddie's bedroom to wake him to help with the morning milking, he had discovered that Freddie was dead. Elizabeth had gone to confirm his findings while he telephoned the doctor and ambulance.

Freddie's eyes were open very wide and he was staring directly up at the ceiling. Elizabeth fancied then that he was staring through the ceiling, the attic, the roof and at the sky and God in the heavens beyond. She looked up for a moment herself, half expecting to see what Freddie saw, but she saw only the ceiling.

While Bradley talked with his father outside, Elizabeth suggested Alice make herself useful since she was there. She ordered her to take one end of the mattress, and they dragged it to the head of the stairs. They slid it down the stairs, but she insisted they not let it touch the crimson carpet in the front hall. Outside the front door, they dragged it to the far corner of the garden where the summer weeds, which Elizabeth reminded herself Harold hadn't cut yet, grew tall, thick and rank. She looked at them with distaste, imagining they were rivalling her garden flowers in the richness and thrust of their growth. She and Alice dragged the mattress into the weeds. Then she added Freddie's pillow, urine-soaked sheets, the rubber sheet, and some magazines she had found in his room.

"So did Harold ask you to move back home to the farm?" Elizabeth asked Bradley, who approached the garden to join his wife. Before giving him a chance to answer, perhaps to refuse, she continued. "You know your father

can't manage all the farm work alone. You could rent or buy a small house in the village and work here on the farm. Of course, your family is too large to live in the house with us now. But half of everything would be yours. And when we pass away, it would all be yours, and Ricky's, of course, I want him to get a share."

As Elizabeth waited for Bradley to answer, she took a box of matches from her apron pocket and lit the paper which was under the sheets. She turned to face Bradley, and fixed her eyes on his. He was hesitating, thinking, she knew, of his own poor, highly mortgaged farm with its clay soil and measuring it against this larger well-maintained and productive farm — its fields verdant and rolling, its soil a soft dark brown, free of rocks.

"No," he said, "we've got our own home now. The way I see it, you can hire another man, reduce the size of your herd, or sell out and retire. You're both retirement age and will have to retire sooner or later anyway."

Elizabeth stared at Bradley with a momentary feeling of defeat, but she refused to be defeated. She did not raise her voice as she was tempted to. Instead she spoke evenly and decisively.

"Bradley, I will not have another hired man disturbing my household. And whatever happens, I will never, I

repeat, never move out of my house. When God takes me, then, and only then, will I leave."

She turned her back triumphantly on them, and said over her shoulder, "I am sending Billy Graham a cheque this afternoon and asking him to pray for poor Freddie's soul. I suggest that you pray also."

She remained standing there, arms folded, and looked skyward at the rising smoke from the burning mattress, sheets and pillow. The stench of burning feathers was overpowering, but she did not move. Billows of smoke followed later by only wisps — the last of Freddie McGregor. She sensed Bradley and Alice's departure, but she remained there a long time, staring upward at the intense blue sky. She imagined herself conducting a funeral for Freddie. Pious and undaunted, lips moving visibly, she prayed the sinner into heaven.

The House

Allison Casselman had been engaged to the same man, Bill Dickson, for twenty-four years. When there were few tables to wait on in the Chesterton Diner, she sometimes thought of Bill and their engagement. The feeling was one of calm satisfaction, for she knew the engagement was permanent and the ring kept customers from flirting with her as they did with Joanne, the young bleached blonde waitress. Joanne had suggested, just yesterday, that Allison dye her hair. There were several white hairs at the sides of her forehead near her ears. She could no more imagine touching up her auburn hair than she could imagine marrying Bill Dickson. "Never!" she had replied.

Allison did not like being a waitress. She preferred the secluded life she had led until two years ago when her mother and father had died within six months of each other. If only she could have made her brother Wayne understand her position — her refusal to marry. She'd known the terms of the will since she'd been twenty; in fact, everyone in the village of Farland knew them. Wayne inherited the barn and farm land, and until she married, she was to have possession of the house. Then, the house became his as well. She could not make him understand her desire to keep the house. He thought she should marry because Bill could provide her with a home. After living in the house for forty-eight years and working and caring for

her parents, she felt the house was all she had. She remembered using the same word "never" to Wayne, who promptly severed his property from hers, sold to a neighbour and hadn't spoken to her since. Next month he would marry a widow from Farland and Allison would not be invited to the wedding. She would work that day. Now that there was no farm income, she had to work in order to maintain her house.

She surveyed the two late afternoon customers from her position behind the counter. George and Rose never ordered a meal, only pie with double scoops of ice-cream and black coffee. They came to the diner two or three afternoons a week and both always ordered the same kind of pie. Today it was cherry. She watched them now as she refilled the salt and pepper shakers, but they were oblivious to her scrutinizing stare. They wore heavy coats in spite of the warm June weather and did not remove them to eat. Rose had her dyed red hair rolled in giant pink curlers held fast by bobby-pins, indicating they would be going out that evening. Both sat there in heavy coats, eating slowly, talking occasionally. She knew their surname was Williams because she passed their large old red and white trailer on her way to work and had seen their name on the mail-box. She found their littered yard and crooked wooden steps offensive. They were always together. She had never seen them separately.

She did not like the work — waiting on others in a diner. But then, she comforted herself with the thought that she had served others all her life. This was just another form of service. She had cooked and cleaned and waited on her brother, mother and father. Now there was only Bill.

He, however, was the one person never to make demands of her. After he had given up hope of ever marrying her (she had made him understand she would never leave the house), their life fell into a comfortable pattern. They dated once a week, she cooked for him about once a month at her house, and they went to church every Sunday. He was her best friend now that Wayne had deserted her. She could always rely on him to accompany her to social functions, never to press her into marriage and never to break the engagement. He understood her, she thought, and accepted the unalterable circumstances.

As she drove home that afternoon from Chesterton to Farland, she was once again happy at the thought she had never married. The house was hers — hers alone — and waiting for her. She thought about it and envisioned it as she drove. Just east of the village, it was the most handsome old field stone house in the county, perhaps in the whole province. The wide verandah wrapped itself around the house and the burgundy shutters and front door were a vivid contrast to the gray stone. When she thought of its

features, she knew people envied her. Its beauty was enhanced by the MacMillans' gray cement block house which was the closest house to hers. Willy MacMillan, who had his bicycle upside-down, repairing it, waved to her. He had been in her Sunday school class two years ago. She waved in return, but it was Willy's father she was thinking about, not Willy. It was Bradley MacMillan who had extended his farm by buying from Wayne, and she resented Bradley for having bought the land and barn. Their house was too near the highway and there were no shutters on the windows. Hers was at the end of a long wide lane, bordered on both sides by stately poplars, but still close enough to the highway to provide an impressive view. Antique dealers did not miss it. Thinking her house contained valuable antiques — and it certainly did — they often stopped to persuade her to sell them. But she wouldn't sell — not ever.

She pulled the red and white uniform over her shoulders and head and dropped it into the wicker laundry basket in the corner of the bathroom. She did not look good in red; she preferred white, gray or green. After running the tub full of warm water and adding rose-scented bubble bath, she did the same with her slip. Then she added her panties and bra to the laundry.

Having soaked the aches, especially from her legs and

feet, she emerged from the bathroom, a small white towel shaped into a turban over her damp hair and a large matching white bath towel folded just above her breasts to hang as a temporary dress. She walked slowly, more comfortable and relaxed now, to her bedroom, and stretched out on the four poster bed. She surveyed the room desirably before closing her eyes. There was a cool clean freshness about the light blue walls and white ceiling, and the late afternoon sun filtered in patterns through her mother's lace curtains. The tilted oval mirror of her oak dresser reflected the profusion of red, pink and white peonies she had arranged in a cut glass vase. Their spring fragrance filled the room, and she inhaled deeply to get the most of it. As she closed her eyes, the aura, the ambiance of her house, especially her bedroom, reclined above her. She smiled, then she stretched her arms upwards in an embrace and sighed.

The Raft, the Bull and the Bridge

Just east of the village of Farland the railroad tracks crossed a large iron bridge. Willy MacMillan looked down at the shallow creek moving lazily over the limestone bed where moss clung to the stone like wet hair brushed in the direction of the current. Then the creek emptied into a wide deep basin, before narrowing again and snaking north through the thick cedars.

Willy, like the other boys, thought of the swimming hole as his. The circular remains of campfires on the shore, the grass cropped ball-park short, and the worn path to the basin seemed to mark the area as public land. But it was owned by Arthur MacFarland who pastured his heifers there during the summer. Since the heifers stayed away from the deep water, and Arthur paid little attention to this poor pasture, which was not attached to his main farm, the boys' feelings of ownership went unchallenged.

Willy and Rat walked along the path to where they'd hidden the logs in the cedars. The raft they were going to build and anchor off shore would give them even stronger claim to the swimming hole.

Willy lay on the flat limestone, the rock burning through his clothes until his body absorbed its heat. He traced the outlines of small fossils in the limestone

while Rat, who was less patient, skipped rocks across the water, trying to beat his record of eighteen skips. Willy watched as the rocks skipped almost to the shallow end of the basin where yellow water lilies grew profusely. The lilies seemed too perfect to be real. When you touched them they felt like wax, almost like plastic flowers. Once he plucked one, but it closed and wilted quickly.

"Nineteen!" Rat shouted. "Okay, we waited long enough. Nobody's watching."

They looked in all directions for police or county road workers before going toward their logs. Still hidden under a large cedar, whose branches touched the ground, were ten new fence posts — stolen at night from the County Road Company and floated down the creek. Beside them were the almost new planks donated by Willy's father.

"He'd never given us these planks, if he knew we stole the logs," Willy reminded Rat. Willy was surprised he felt so little guilt for the theft. Rat felt no guilt and less fear. But then Rat often stole things — comic books, cigarettes, money from milk bottles. Willy wondered if Rat would become a professional thief in later life. There'd been over three hundred posts in the yard, Rat argued, and they'd taken only what they needed.

"We've waited a whole week, like you said, and nobody's missed them. Let's build it tomorrow," Rat pleaded.

"We've waited long enough."

They walked back to the railroad station, thinking about the raft, and when they were almost there, they met Arthur MacFarland. He was a tall man with black hair and wrinkles around his eyes and on his forehead. Not wrinkles, according to Willy's mother, but worry lines — worrying about what to do with all his money. Breathing heavily from the exertion and his great weight, he paused to stare at them — one of those what-business-have-you-kids-got-down-here, or what-have-you-been-up-to stares. But Willy's uneasiness was only momentary. They had as much right being on the tracks as he did.

Before Rat got on his bicycle, he looked in the window of Arthur's white cadillac which was parked at the station platform. "He was wearing a suit today," Rat remarked. "This must be one of his money-collecting days. God, I wish I had his money. Besides his big farm, he owns our house and six others. Think of all the rent he gets. And the village is partly named for his father."

"My mother says that doesn't amount to a whole lot. His ancestors could have been horse thieves in Scotland."

"So could yours!" Rat replied, and as Willy pedalled home, he wondered if Rat could be right.

* * *

Willy and Rat were on their raft with three of their

friends when the first stone splashed in the water about a hundred yards away. They looked up to see several farm boys from west of the village standing on the bridge. Another stone hit the water.

"Hey, why don't you come swimming?" Rat taunted, knowing the boys couldn't swim and had no swimming suits with them. A third stone struck the water before the throwers were distracted by MacFarland's bull.

The bull bellowed and crashed into the fence, maddened by the boys' rocks and jeers.

"They're afraid to come down because of the bull, and they're just making him crazier," Willy said. "Someday he'll break down that fence and get them."

The bull chased Willy and his friends regularly to the water's edge. He was a huge old holstein, driven mad, Willy thought, by the heavy five foot chain attached to the brass ring in his nose. The large ring pierced and stretched his nose. He walked carefully, dragging the chain between his legs.

Usually they could hear the bull approaching, announcing his anger by a low bellowing which became thunderous and defiant. Just an hour ago he chased them into the water. They could almost feel his hot breath, but as he lowered his head to attack, he stepped on the chain. His head was jerked sideways and he stumbled, giving the

boys time to escape to the raft. As they sat trembling no one spoke. Each was vowing to be more careful.

The bull stamped along the shore, shaking his head menacingly, pawing up dirt, and bellowing his rage and hurt. Blood from his nose covered the ring and, mixing with the froth from his mouth, dripped down the chain. As Willy looked at him, he recalled what he'd heard of rabid dogs, and decided the bull was definitely insane.

The bull continued to bellow, claiming the pasture as his. Hoping he would soon leave, the boys on the raft didn't taunt him. When they slipped into the water and their heads were hidden by the far side of the raft, the bull, feeling he'd made his point, ambled to the shade of the cedars to join the heifers.

* * *

Willy and Rat walked along the railroad tracks from the swimming hole to the station, and the bull raged in the pasture, tearing up clods of grass with his front feet and ramming the fence posts with his great head in mock battle. Approaching from the station, Arthur MacFarland was walking very fast. He was wearing his straw hat and bib overalls.

"This must be one of his farming days," Willy remarked.

Very red and choking with anger, Arthur stopped and

shouted at them. "Look at what you've done to my bull, throwing stones at him and teasing him till he's crazy! He's so cross I'll never be able to handle him. I'll probably have to shoot him."

Rat was ready to run, but when Willy stopped, he did too. As Willy looked at Rat in disbelief at the accusation, he noticed Rat had turned white and was shaking.

"We never threw anything at your bull," Willy countered. "I live on a farm. I know better than to tease a bull. We just come here to swim. We didn't throw any rocks."

"I know damned well you did!" Arthur roared, bubbles of spit spluttering from the corners of his mouth. "I don't want you anywhere near my land or swimming in that creek again. It's private property. I'd better not see you there, either of you, or there'll be trouble!"

Willy didn't know where his own anger came from. He'd never talked back to an adult before, not even his parents, who would have thrashed him soundly. It was almost as if he were someone else, shouting in calm, controlled anger — some other person he'd never been or known.

"If you want to know who throws stones at your bull, just ask your son and his friends. They've been here

lots of times, not swimming like us, but just to tease the bull. Why don't you ask him, if you really want to know?"

Willy, refusing to move, stood staring down the large man. Arthur turned first and started walking toward the bridge. More angry now, having been challenged by a thirteen year old, he shouted over his shoulder fiercely, "Stay off my land, or there'll be trouble, I'm warning you!"

"You don't own the creek," Willy shouted, "just the land! We'll walk down the creek to swim in the basin, and not you nor anyone else can stop us!"

Willy stood there and watched Arthur walk away. Only when he had disappeared down the ditch near the bridge, did Willy start to walk. When he moved, his legs were weak and trembling, but he didn't let on to Rat.

"You shouldn't have yelled at him like that. If he tells my mother, I'm gonna be in trouble. He was really mad. Maybe he'll kick us out of his house or raise the rent."

"What do you have to worry about? You didn't say anything. I did all the yelling, didn't I?"

Willy knew if Arthur told his father about his behaviour, he'd be beaten. He'd survive the beating because his mother would be there, pleading with his father

to go easy and stop before he hurt him. The worst would be the embarrassment and disappointment his father would feel that his son had shouted at and defied one of his friends and the man who held the mortgage on his farm. The greatest hurt Arthur could have inflicted (and Willy was sure he would have done so if he'd known) would have been to tell his father.

* * *

Willy and Rat examined the shore until they found the tire tracks. Their raft had been pulled by a tractor to the far north end of the pasture, where it made a very sturdy bridge across the ditch. They stood staring at it for a long time. Willy thought of all the planning and fun they'd had, but it was too heavy to drag back. They'd had difficulty even sliding it into the creek.

"It was our raft, and the bastard stole it!" Rat said angrily, looking at Willy for support.

"Well, just remember," Willy replied despondently, looking at the bridge, "we stole it too."

As they stood there, defeated, Willy wondered at the strange workings of justice and the pettiness of Arthur MacFarland.

The Dark Cedar Forest

As Wendy MacMillan walked slowly along the highway, she thought the mid-September sunshine was more like that of mid-July, baking the road surface and intensifying the heat. In the ditch, among the waist-high grass and ragweed, the crickets sang to her in a high staccato, as if their song were a celebration of the unexpected heat.

She walked on the gravel shoulder, making her way from the village elementary school to her parents' farm on the outskirts of Farland. Brushing against the grass and weeds, she kept well away from passing cars and the heat which radiated from the pavement. It was too damned hot to be in school all day. She wondered why she had been so stupid as to have brought so many books when she'd probably use only half of them. But now that she was in grade eight, she'd decided to do enough homework to be sure to pass. Everyone said how much harder grade eight would be. She reminded herself she had to pass and be in high school next September.

Her mother thought she was too anxious to leave elementary school and grow up, and preferred she play with children her own age, but Wendy seldom did. Beth, her best friend, who was now in grade nine, waved to her from the window of the large yellow school bus which sent a gush of warm air over her body as it sped past. High school kids were lucky. They got to ride to and from

school every day, picked up and let off in front of their houses. She was still one of the elementary kids, all of whom lived within walking distance of their school. Next year, she would be in grade nine and on that bus.

Soon she would reach the Hayes' house, the small white house Mildred and her husband Hiram had rented that summer when he'd gotten a job with the county road repair and paving company. As she walked along, she remembered the first week of school when she had passed the house every afternoon without stopping. Mildred had been sitting on the front verandah every day, smoking and watching her walk by. She noticed that Mildred had been watching her, as she sat there with the triplets. The triplets had stared too, she recalled, as if they also wanted her to stop. She was curious about what the house looked like inside and curious about the triplets, because she'd never seen triplets before, not even twins. The three girls were so similar to their mother. They were small and thin, with straight blonde, almost white hair parted in the centre and hanging to their shoulders. Their skin was also pale, almost as if they had never been off the verandah and in the sun. If the mother had been shorter and younger, all four would have been identical.

One day when it had started raining just as she reached the Hayes' house, Mildred had called her inside. She got to meet the triplets, Cathy, Chris and Clara, and she liked

them at once. They were shy little girls, just like dolls, she thought, the dolls she'd given up playing with about four years ago when she started reading Nancy Drew mysteries.

The livingroom was small, containing only a television, a coffee table, a sofa and two matching armchairs. The sofa and chairs were wine-coloured, the material worn thin and shiny and the springs almost popping through. The triplets sat on the sofa and huddled together, afraid of the storm. Mildred made instant coffee for herself and Wendy, and she gave a whole orange popsicle to Clara but split the second one in half for Chris and Cathy. Then she turned on "The Secret Storm" which Wendy always hurried home to watch after school. As they watched the soap, she lit a cigarette and offered one to Wendy.

Wendy remembered hesitating that first time, but Mildred had said, "Don't be shy if you want one. I won't tell nobody you smoke."

"Thanks, I haven't had one for a week," Wendy said as she accepted the cigarette, "not since I was at my best friend Beth's. She stole them from her mother's purse and we smoked them behind the outhouse."

Mildred laughed. "I used to do the same thing. I sneaked Momma's cigarettes when she wasn't looking. By the time I was sixteen, I was a full-time smoker."

They watched "The Secret Storm", but only half

watched it. Mildred preferred talking and Wendy found her more interesting than the soap. She learned a lot about Mildred, even during that first visit.

She and Hiram, that was her second husband, had moved from Ashton, a city about sixty miles west of Farland. He'd been one of the boarders at her mother's rooming house in Ashton. He had been okay at first, but now that he had a family to support, their marriage was no bed of roses.

She and her first husband had been divorced shortly after she had had her first baby. "It was a boy," she said, "but it was awful. He wasn't right. His face was all out of shape, like a pig's. I saw him once, but would never look at him again. It was the devil's work." She fixed her eyes on Wendy's and blew smoke rings. "Jeff, that's my first husband, took off with a floozy waitress and Momma got me a divorce."

"And having three at once," she added, "that's the devil's work, too. It's like having a litter. One's okay. One at a time. I heard of one French woman that had five, all the same, all identical. Thank God, I can't have any more. God knows what I'd have!"

Just then lightning cracked and thunder rumbled deeply across the sky. The triplets trembled and started to cry. "Never mind that," Mildred said, "that's just the potatoes rolling round in the cellar." Wendy laughed and the girls looked suspiciously at the floor as if they could see

through to the rolling potatoes.

Wendy was intrigued by Mildred's strange stories. She thought of the baby pig with the deformed snout, the runt her father had hit over the head to put it out of its misery, and of the two-headed calf, born dead, that Beth had told her about.

Each time Wendy had stopped at Mildred's after school, she learned more about the family. The triplets were five years old, and Hiram had difficulty telling them apart. Mildred did not dress them identically. They wore each other's clothes, never caring whose clothes were whose. Mildred said she didn't have time to see each wore her own clothes just so Hiram could keep their names straight. She could tell them apart, and soon Wendy could too. Cathy had a slight space between her two front teeth, Chris had a tendency to put her finger in her mouth, and Clara's dark brown eyes were mischievous.

The one thing Wendy did not like about Mildred was her obvious favouring of Clara. Clara, she said, was the oldest, the first born. Wendy wondered how Mildred could really be sure of this fact, and why it really mattered who was born first; however, she was not bold enough to ask.

Hiram had arrived home from work early only twice when Wendy was still there. What seemed strange to her, as he entered the room, was his enormous size in relation to his tiny, thin wife. He was over six feet tall, she guessed,

and weighed close to three hundred pounds. He moved slowly, always breathing heavily. She tried not to be in the house when he was there because he seemed to fill the small livingroom. He reminded her of a really big Alfred Hitchcock, with the same large stomach and droopy, puffy face.

Although he had only nodded to her, she didn't feel he resented her being there smoking Mildred's cigarettes. But she felt uneasy because he, unlike Mildred, didn't talk to her. He just asked Mildred why supper wasn't ready yet, and she'd reply she had been watching "The Secret Storm", and to hold his horses.

Every afternoon now, the highlight of Wendy's school day was stopping at Mildred's to have chips and Coke or coffee, play with the triplets, and watch "The Secret Storm". She knew Mildred and the triplets watched and waited for her every day.

Wendy felt especially glad this afternoon to be able to stop and get out of the heat. She'd walked faster for the last hundred yards and she was sweating. She had worn her new white sweater, even though her mother had advised her not to. It was going to be too hot, her mother had said. She hated to admit her mother was right. It was too hot for a sweater, she should have worn a cotton blouse. She slowed down again as she crossed the bridge over Farland Creek so that she would not appear to be too anxious to get to Mildred's and the cigarettes. She opened

the screen door and called Mildred's name.

"It's too damned hot for coffee today," Mildred called from the kitchen. "You could fry eggs on that highway. Let's have Cokes instead."

They watched "The Secret Storm". Peter was having problems with his marriage. "I hope he don't think he's the only one with marriage problems," Mildred remarked bitterly. Then she complained to Wendy about Hiram.

Wendy had heard many of Mildred's complaints before. Mildred spent too damned much money on cigarettes, Cokes and candy. But Mildred had replied she'd always smoked, even before he'd married her, and kids had to have candies and soft drinks. That was part of being a kid. Mildred reached for more chips. Hiram expected his supper to be cooked and on the table every night as soon as he opened the door. She had to cook meat and potatoes every day. You'd think that in this heat, he'd settle for sandwiches and canned soup. But no, he had to have meat and potatoes every meal, forcing her to heat the whole kitchen up with that stove. He hardly made enough money to support them, so she said she might as well go back to her mother, who'd gladly keep her and the kids. She could help her mother out around the boarding house. Anyway Ashton was a hell of a lot more interesting than being stuck here in Farland with a husband who was always bitching.

And it was getting worse now, she said. He's got a

bad heart and not supposed to work. Since he's been to the doctor, he just complains and broods. But she knew how to shut him up when he complained too much. Just threaten to leave and he gets real uneasy.

At a quarter to five they heard the car in the driveway. "He's home early," Mildred said. "I'd better be getting supper ready, before he starts bitching again. Stop by in the morning if you can on your way to school and I'll give you a dollar to get me some more cigarettes. I'm almost out and I don't want to ask Hiram to get them for me. We'll have coffee before you have to leave for school. Here, take one for the road." Wendy took the cigarette and put it in her pencil case inside her school bag, as she had done every afternoon.

Just as she was buckling the school bag, Hiram filled the door which led from the kitchen to the livingroom.

"Supper'll be ready in a half hour," Mildred said.

"Push us on the swing before you go, Wendy," Clara pleaded. Cathy and Chris each grabbed her by one of her hands and pulled her toward the door.

Hiram had taken a kitchen chair and was sitting on the back verandah. He didn't appear to notice her as the girls pulled her toward the large willow which grew near the back corner of the house. There were three ropes with tires tied to each, and the triplets climbed into the tires. Wendy went from one swing to the other in turn, giving each a push.

As she followed her pushing routine — one, two, three, Cathy, Chris, Clara — she looked sideways at their father.

Hiram sat on the chair, silent and unmoving. She could see the large drops of sweat on his forehead slowly run down his face and drip off his chin onto his soiled white shirt. He still paid no attention to her; in fact, he didn't even seem to notice she was there. There was a dark cedar forest on the other side of Farland Creek at the end of the hay field. His gaze appeared to be fixed on this. The sweat continued to roll off his face and his eyes never left the forest.

Wendy felt uncomfortable. "I gotta go home now," she whispered to the triplets. "I'll see you tomorrow."

When Wendy reached home, she sat in the shade on the front verandah to study her spelling, hoping her mother hadn't noticed that she'd arrived home after five o'clock. Her mother might raise a fuss again about her stopping so often at Mildred's. She reminded herself to put the cigarette in her secret hiding place, in case her mother went into her pencil case for a pen.

Last week, one afternoon before supper, when she'd admitted to stopping at Mildred's, her mother'd really sounded off. "I don't want you there so often, making a nuisance of yourself. That woman's got three kids to look after already, without you always hanging around. I met her in the grocery store last Saturday, smoking like a

chimney. I don't want you picking up her bad habits. And she talks like a teenager. She couldn't've always been that way. I bet having those three kids all at once affected her mentally, made her simple. Imagine, three at once! That's bound to affect anyone. Thank God, twins and triplets don't run in our family. Poor woman, I feel sorry for her. Once in a while's all right to stop, but don't you be making a habit of it."

Wendy hadn't said anything. She didn't agree with her mother's idea of triplets affecting a woman mentally. She liked Mildred, with the exception of her favouring Clara, and didn't think she was simple at all. But she knew better than to argue. Her mother dominated the household, and even her father didn't seem to win arguments with her mother.

The next morning after breakfast, when her mother went into the bathroom at seven-thirty, Wendy grabbed her school bag and her lunch and started walking to school. She could be at Mildred's by twenty to eight if she walked really fast.

When she reached the driveway of the Hayes' house, she saw that the car was not there. That meant Hiram was gone to work. The front door was open, so she called through the screen door to Mildred, but heard no reply. Maybe she was in the bathroom upstairs. Wendy was in the middle of the livingroom when she noticed the clothes laid

out neatly on the sofa. A large dark blue suit, still in the cleaner's clear plastic bag, a white shirt, tie, socks and black oxfords. She became very nervous about being in the house, and wondered if Mildred was even there. Maybe she had left Hiram after all, taken the triplets and left in the car. She looked in the kitchen, but saw no one. Feeling uneasy about being discovered inside the house by Hiram, she made her way across the empty kitchen to leave by the back screen door, in case he suddenly came down the stairs and surprised her there. She stopped abruptly on the verandah, and dropped her lunch and school bag.

She stood, for a moment, transfixed by the scene. First she saw one of the three tires on the lawn near an overturned kitchen chair. Then, looking up, Hiram, on the end of a rope, his face all blue and bug-eyed, facing sideways toward the dark cedar forest on the far side of Farland Creek.

She fled the scene, running in long strides all the way home. As she neared home she was crying, stumbling and gasping for air. She ran into the driveway, up the side steps and into the kitchen. When she slammed the screen door behind her, her mother turned from the sink where she was doing the breakfast dishes.

Wendy stood there shaking, breathless, unable to speak, and her legs seemed about to buckle beneath her.

"My God, what happened to you?" Alice demanded, pulling

a chair over to her and forcing her to sit. "Tell me slowly."

When Wendy finished screaming her story at her mother, Alice rushed through the back screen door and Wendy could hear her yelling at the barn where her father was working. "Bradley, get in here right away! Quick!"

Her father must have run, because she could hear her mother in the back yard repeating her story. "Hiram Hayes hung himself in a tree behind the house. Wendy found him there. Get in here quick and call the police while I see to Wendy."

Wendy asked her mother for a cup of coffee and Alice looked at her as if to refuse, but she turned to pour the coffee. "Okay, but just this once, and I'm putting lots of milk in it. Are you sure you're all right?"

"Yes, but my knees feel weak."

"I wish you hadn't been going up there all the time."

Wendy ignored the remark. "My lunch and school bag. I dropped them. They're still there."

Alice assured her Bradley would bring them back. He would be there at least until the police arrived. She should go to school today anyway. It would be easier if she did, because she wouldn't spend so much time thinking about it. Maybe she should go and lie down until her father returned. But he'd drive her to school so that she wouldn't have to walk past the house, and he'd pick her up

after school too. She'd write a note to the teacher explaining the lateness.

Wendy took her coffee and went upstairs. She set the mug on her dresser, and opened the bottom drawer which contained her socks and underwear. She lifted the folded underwear, pulled back the paper lining, and took out her three reserve cigarettes and matches. She put these into the pocket of her blouse. Then she slid open the screen of her bedroom window, took off her shoes and stepped in stockinged feet onto the roof of the verandah. She reached inside and pulled the blind down, even with the window sill. Holding her mug carefully, she crept to a place where there was no dew on the tin because of the overhang of the upper roof.

She heard the screen door on the verandah below open and close, and she knew her mother was sitting there, staring up the highway, waiting for her father to return.

Her hands shook so that she had difficulty lighting the first cigarette. When she succeeded, she inhaled deeply and tried to blow smoke rings, tried not to think of Hiram.

As she drew on it quickly and deeply, her head reeled from the nicotine. She remembered she had been running fast and shaking, and that she'd screamed the story at her mother. She was as white as a sheet — she could still feel it.

She wondered if Mildred was in Ashton now, calmly

complaining to her mother about Hiram, explaining why she had left, not knowing what he had done. She thought of the clothes he had laid out to be buried in and shuddered. She felt no sympathy for Mildred now. How little Mildred must have cared for Hiram! Maybe she'd be upset for a while, but probably not for long.

She was smoking her second cigarette and was calmer now. As she looked over the corn field from her vantage point, she could see the dark cedar forest Hiram had his eyes fixed on. What did he see there? Sweating and staring at it, and then swollen and bug-eyed, still staring. She shuddered again.

She continued to stare, unable to take her eyes from the cedar forest. This outside, adult world, the one away from elementary school and parents, the one into which she would proceed, had a darker side, like the inside of the forest. Anything unexpected and terrible could happen. She leaned her head against the rough gray cement-block wall and closed her eyes, trying to imagine herself in her twenties. The image which appeared to her was Mildred's, not her own, and the face was bitter. She opened her eyes, suddenly feeling less anxious to grow up.

She sipped the last of her coffee, which was only lukewarm now, and drew on the third cigarette more slowly to make it last longer. She was still staring in the direction of the cedars when the butt scorched her fingertips. Then

she watched it roll slowly to the eaves-trough where it joined the other two.

Fathers and Sons

Willy MacMillan stood beside his father in the graveyard and looked at the oak coffin gleaming in the late May sunshine. There were three heavy ornate brass handles on each side of the coffin, and all but two were turned down. The two pointed stubbornly skyward, as if resisting the black rectangular hole. Near it a blanket of artificial turf formed an emerald tent over the mound of fresh earth, rendering the scene more pleasant and unreal. Soon his paternal grandfather would be in that hole — unwillingly and forever. The flowers — everything was neatly arranged and in place, just as it should be, except for the two handles which caught and reflected the sun.

His grandmother, standing alone and closest to the coffin, didn't seem to notice the defiant handles, and her proximity prevented any rectifying of the situation. Dressed completely in black, she looked formidable. Always a stoic and religious woman, she had obscured her face by a long black veil as impenetrable as her cloak of piety. Behind it her lips moved in prayer, imploring her Maker to take her soon, for she had always been a good Christian and was ready. Her hands clasped the metal walker, but its dull surface reflected no light.

Willy's mother stood behind him with the rest of the family and mourners, waiting for the minister to begin.

He could hear the occasional whisper and subdued clearing of throats which broke the unreal, suspended silence. Although he couldn't make out the words, he knew what they were — what was always said.

"Well, you couldn't ask for finer weather."

"Ninety-six, eh? Well, he's had a good life then."

"It's all for the best when you're that old. It's a blessing."

"There's really a nice turnout, don't you think?"

"When I go, I'd like it to be in the spring like this. It's so much more pleasant."

"I wonder why the reverend hasn't started yet?"

His father looked slightly aside from the coffin at the hay in the field beside the graveyard, and Willy followed his gaze. Thick green hay, choked by a profusion of mauve-flowered clover, wafted the graveyard with an aroma of honey and spring. If his grandfather could have been anywhere else, Willy mused, he should have been on a mower pulled by a matched team, with rhythmic switching of tails and foaming of nostrils. Willy wished his father were mowing hay too, instead of standing awkwardly, not knowing what to do with his hands.

He shifted his feet and moved closer to his father so that his right arm touched his father's left arm. His father didn't shift his position and they both looked

at the upturned glittering brass handles.

Willy felt a sudden urge to walk directly to the coffin and slam the other four handles upright. His father would be the only one who understood. He himself wouldn't have understood this urge until recently, when he had spent that one brief intimate moment with his grandfather.

Willy stood in the kitchen with his overnight bag in his hand. His mother finished testing the vegetables before she placed the fork on the counter and turned toward him. Grandfather was in the hospital, she announced, her tone resigned and matter of fact.

"There's nothing they can really find wrong or do," she explained, turning and lowering the heat on the vegetables. "It's just old age — he's ninety-six. He can't take care of himself and they won't keep him there long. Your father'll have to put him in a nursing home. And she can't look after herself either, all alone in that big old house. They'll both have to go."

Willy reminded her that last year Grandfather had rallied just when everyone had decided he had only a few days left.

"He sure fooled us all that time," she agreed, "but Brad says he don't look good at all and his mind wanders.

Sometimes he knows you and sometimes he don't."

Harold's mind had retreated thirty years, to a time before he quit farming. He drove horses in his sleep and talked to old Freddie McGregor, the hired man. He mended fences, picked stones and kept up a flow of words with Ben and Bill, the team of matching black geldings that won first prize at the county fair three years in a row.

Willy watched her take the corner of the dish towel and wipe a small circle of steam from the kitchen window. She peered across the highway at the barn and turned, unable to disguise her anxiety. "Your father should be in from the barn by now."

"How's he handling all this?" Willy was more concerned for his father than the grandfather he hardly knew.

"Oh, you know him." She paused and folded the dish towel. "He makes out like it don't bother him, but it does. You know he's got power of attorney and has to look after everything. The whole load's on his shoulders."

Something in his mother's tone told Willy the burden was on her shoulders as well. She enjoyed burdens, he decided, just as much as she enjoyed the removal of a burden — the consequent relief.

"He was gone all afternoon looking at nursing homes. He chose the one over in Southfield. Since it's so close

to their farm, maybe Elizabeth'll agree to go into it without too much fuss."

Willy heard his father at the door and watched him enter the house with jerky, deliberate steps. From the open bathroom door, he could hear the running and splashing of water. Bradley walked into the hallway to dry his hands. As he stood rubbing himself roughly with the towel, he stared at them, defying them to think anything was out of the ordinary.

"He's bought himself a bottle of whiskey," Alice whispered.

Supper was awkward and quiet. Willy listened to Alice's gossip about neighbours, as she tried to divert attention from Bradley's drunkenness and create an air of normality. Bradley said nothing, but from time to time he glanced at them through glassy, bloodshot eyes.

Suddenly he burst forth in thick-tongued words: "Well, I may be getting the old age pension and the Canada pension next year, but no one's putting me in no goddamn old folks' home. Remember that!" He pointed his fork defiantly at his wife and son. "No sir, you go if you want to, Alice. Me, I'll just fall off the tractor one day on the back forty, and that'll be it."

Bradley stared at Alice and Willy for a response, but gave them no time to reply. He thumped the heavy

wooden table with his fist. As the dishes bounced and clattered, he laughed to himself. "Why you bastards'd starve if it wasn't for me working!" Holding his fork in his right hand, he made a grand circular gesture around the bowls and platters of food at the centre of the table. Letting his fork drop noisily on his partially eaten plate of food, he rose unsteadily and left to do the evening chores.

Willy sat there, disturbed by his father's revelations and alienation. Overcome by a surge of sympathy for his grandfather whom he hadn't seen for several years and might never see alive again, he suggested his mother and he go to the hospital to visit Harold while his father was milking.

"I suppose we could, but he probably won't even know us. It isn't exactly as if your father's family has ever been close to us."

"Well, then we'll go for Bradley's sake."

Harold was propped by pillows, his knees making a tent of the white sheets and his head and chest inclining to meet his knees. Only the shrunken spectre of a head appeared from the enveloping sheets and white hospital gown. He seemed a shrivelled tiny being — a dim reflection of someone Willy had known — and reminded him of a

gaunt perched bird, waiting, expressionless and immobile. Harold stared at the wall above the foot of his bed. Intent on something else, beyond his fixed vision, he didn't realize anyone had entered the room.

Alice broke the silence. "I bet he won't know you." She went directly to the head of the bed and shook Harold gently. "You got visitors, Harold. This is Willy, Bradley's boy, your grandson. Bradley was here to visit this afternoon. Do you remember Willy?"

Willy moved to the head of the bed also, on the opposite side from his mother. Harold turned slowly and looked at him through straining eyes. "Oh, yes, Willy George. You've growed quite a bit, Willy George."

Willy George McMaster, scarcely a dwarfish four and a half feet tall, a distant relative and friend of Harold, had died ten years earlier at the age of seventy-four.

"No, this is Bradley's boy, Willy," Alice laughed, "Willy MacMillan."

Willy watched the smile fade from his grandfather's face and his eyes drift a moment toward the blank white wall. Suddenly his eyes darted fearfully about and he pulled his knees closer to his body. His voice quavered and his eyes watered. "You don't want my bed, do you? I don't have to get out, do I?"

"No," Willy answered, as if soothing a frightened

child, "no, I've got my own bed. You can keep this one."

"Have you had lots of visitors?" Alice asked, changing the subject.

"No, nobody."

"But Bradley was here early this afternoon. Don't you remember?"

"No, nobody was here."

A smiling nurse entered and gently fluffed Harold's pillows. "Mr. MacMillan, why don't you put your legs out flat? Then you won't have so much air under the sheets and you'll be warmer."

"No, no!" he burst out defiantly, straightening his back, raising his head and looking at her fiercely.

His eyes followed the nurse until she had left the room and then they turned slowly toward Willy and Alice. He reached for Willy's arm and drew him close to whisper a confidence the nurse and Alice were not allowed to hear. Willy noticed for the first time his large pawlike hands — his father's hands — and the fierce hazel eyes, which were also his father's eyes. Harold's hand was warm on his arm, and he felt the body heat penetrate his flannel shirt.

"You know," he whispered hoarsely, "if you put your knees down, they throw ground on you. I keep them up all the time." He turned slowly away from them, as if they

were no longer there, and once more concentrated on the spot he'd chosen on the blank white wall.

Summer Flowers

Henry Campbell reached slowly and deliberately for the lamp chain, but his hand shook uncontrollably and he wondered this time how readily he could find it. Although his bed had been moved to the dining-room six months ago, at his daughter Alice's insistence, because he could no longer manage the stairs and the only bathroom was downstairs, he was still unaccustomed to his surroundings. Without the light, he would bump into the dining-room furniture, rearranged to accommodate his bed, and wake his son Alex who was asleep upstairs. Alex's anger would result in another attempt to place him in a nursing home, and he would stubbornly refuse. This was his home. It had been since his father had died, and nobody was moving him anywhere else to die.

As he pulled the chain, the small round blue porcelain lamp bobbed toward him. He froze at the thought of the lamp crashing to the floor; however, it fell on the bed beside him, its beige shade aslant, its bulb glaring at him, filling the room with light. He breathed easily again, swung his legs over the side of the bed, and replaced the lamp on the bedside table.

To get to the bathroom, which was off the kitchen, he had to leave his bed-dining-room and cross the full lengths of the livingroom and kitchen. He took the long

route past the furniture ranged against the walls, furniture which was mostly waist high and served as a handrail or resting spot. Where there was no furniture, he moved cautiously along the wall, sometimes leaning against it briefly for support.

He moved in short sliding steps, hardly bending his stiff knees. The shuffle, he would say to himself and laugh inwardly, no expression lighting his solemn face. It didn't do, he had decided long ago, to let others know everything you were thinking. Keep them puzzled and they won't know what you're up to nor what to do. He did not need lights beyond the bed-dining-room, nor would he turn them on. Lights in the livingroom would shine up the staircase and probably give him away. The path was now familiar, for the same furniture had been in the same place for at least twenty years.

The bathroom, constructed years ago from a large kitchen pantry, was conveniently small. He could reach from any point and touch the basin, toilet, medicine cabinet, or bits of wall.

Supporting himself with his right hand on the edge of the sink, he looked at his reflection in the oblong mirror which was the door of the medicine cabinet. It was a grayish white, sharp-featured face, with watery blue eyes which had faded, retreated somewhat.

From his prominent nose grew tufts of coarse white hair which he could no longer trim because of his unsteady hands. The barber in the village would trim them. He hadn't been to the barber for seven weeks, he could remember that clearly. Above his high wide forehead, which gave his narrower cheeks and pointed chin an oval shape, grew a mass of thick white hair on top and sides.

As he combed his hair with the fingers of his left hand, he remembered his last trip to the barber. Yes, it had been seven weeks since he had been outside the white farmhouse, and then to the barber. A trip to the barbershop was refreshing, a good change. He heard the village gossip from the barber and talked to some of his friends who often sat about the shop. It also reminded them, he thought, that he still existed, that he was not dead, that he'd return in a few weeks.

He tried to remember what the outside of the house looked like — badly in need of paint he decided. It had, in fact, faded to a grayish sickly white, a pallor (although he didn't realize it) much like his own. He wondered who would paint a house. Most of the old frame farmhouses had been covered with that aluminum siding that had become so popular. He wished he could paint it himself, as he had so often in the past. Alex could, but he wouldn't — too damned lazy and that excuse of a bad

back.

Henry fumbled with the button of his pyjama bottoms with his right hand, now having switched his support on the sink to his left hand. He turned, let the bottoms slip to his ankles, and sat to urinate.

As he washed his hands, he realized his mouth was pasty and his throat was dry, but he remembered not to drink water in the bathroom. The well water, which had always been good, was no longer drinkable — only used for washing. Preoccupied with his thirst, he forgot to turn off the bathroom light before shuffling to the refrigerator where Alex kept the containers of water he brought daily from a neighbour.

When he pulled the handle, the door opened only about two inches and he could not understand why. Pulling harder, he heard the clinking of metal. Through slow investigation in the dark, he felt the thin chain which extended around the refrigerator and was secured by a lock to the handle. He thought of getting the hacksaw but couldn't remember where he'd seen it last. That he no longer had the strength to use it did not occur to him.

The bastard, he said to himself, did he think I'd leave the door open, drink from the jug, or spill water on the floor? Anger rendered his mouth parched and

throat even drier. The chain in his hands shook, and tears of indignation streaked cheeks which had not felt tears since his wife had died ten years before when he was sixty-nine.

As Henry shuffled even more slowly back to his bed-dining-room, he wondered what she'd think of Alex now. — Alex, whom she'd favoured and babied. It was at her insistence that he'd helped Alex buy a nearby farm which he'd operated until he slipped from a ladder to the hay mow and hurt his back. Always lived at home. Sold the farm for five times what he'd paid for it. Fifty-six years old and on a disability pension for a bad back, which was not really that bad. Alex whom he had to depend upon for everything now. Alex who had become more of an enemy than friend and son. He figures, Henry mused, the weaker I get physically, the closer he is to putting me in a nursing home. And he can put me there, if he can get Alice to agree with him.

Henry wondered what had happened to that previous, unspoken understanding between Alex and himself. He had bought the groceries, paid the bills and cooked, while Alex had lazily shovelled the snow, mowed the lawn and was just generally around. He never should have been so generous and easy with Alex, he could see that now. Alex had been given everything with nothing expected in

return.

Alex banged pots and pans, left dishes unwashed and never swept the floor once Henry could no longer cook and clean. He slammed the plates of food he'd cooked onto the table. He could not, in fact, cook well and Henry decided that he must often eat at the village bar and restaurant where he socialized. Alex's eyes would flash as if to say, "I've cooked! Eat!"

As Henry's head sank into the pillow, he remembered one evening meal at which he'd left part of his food uneaten and shuffled into the livingroom to his lazy-boy chair. There was always too much salt on the food and everything was overcooked. Alex brought the plate and put it on his lap. "Eat that," he threatened, "or I'll throw ya out in the damn snowbank where ya belong!"

When Henry suddenly stood, forgetting the plate, it clattered to the floor, spilling the food on the floor and the mat in front of his chair. He shook with such a spasm of rage that he sank back into the chair. "Don't you talk to me like that, you goddamned pup! Get out of this goddamned house if you don't like it. You don't have to stay. Just goddamned well clear out!"

Alex returned to the kitchen, took his coat and left. But he was up when Henry came to the kitchen the

next morning and the spilled food was cleaned from the floor.

Thinking of this new Alex, an Alex he'd never really seen until Alex had been forced to do things himself, made Henry's pulse increase and made him even more thirsty and angry. There was that new washer and drier Alex bought without asking him the day after the spilled food incident. It's almost as if he was getting even with me, Henry thought, buying them with my money without even asking. I'm nobody's fool, I know what's going on. The more of my money he spends on the house, the less there'll be for Alice, since the house'll be his.

The pension cheques used to be more than enough to pay the household expenses, but now that Alex cashed them, he never returned the extra money to Henry. Alex said the price of everything was going up. Henry didn't call him a liar, but he knew that the cost of living hadn't risen that quickly.

Henry now regretted having gone to his lawyer a year earlier with Alex to sign over his power of attorney. He had relinquished all his power and now had to accept everything in silence because of his physical dependence. Thank God, he thought, I wasn't fool enough to leave him my money as well as the house. He's probably madder'n

hell Alice gets that. Probably figures he deserves the money.

As Henry thought of the chain again, he knew for certain Alex wanted him out of the house and that he'd apply all sorts of pressures to get his way. Henry knew, too, that the moment he was in a nursing home or dead, Alex would move in his woman friend from her apartment in the village. Always someone else's wife or ex-wife, been like that for years. She'd move in and cook and clean for him. He knew Alex's plan — a plan which would mean no work for himself and no responsibility. He'd never marry his current woman, who wasn't even divorced and never would be if her husband had any say in the matter. She and Henry knew Alex well enough to realize he'd never commit himself to marriage — to any woman. And Anna, a very moral and church-minded person, would roll over in her grave, Henry thought, if I allowed a common-law arrangement. He felt a degree of smug satisfaction that Alex's woman would never get into the house as long as he was there. And he was there to stay. They'd have to carry him out, he'd not go willingly.

Henry realized he'd never go to sleep if he didn't stop thinking about Alex. Instead, he thought of the house — his house. The house was special, for sometimes when he thought about it long enough it would trigger the

past for him, almost as if the house were part of him. Tonight he had passed the chair his father had made, the one still in the corner of the kitchen; and although he hadn't seen it in the darkness, he was aware it was there. When I was a child, Henry thought, there were six of them, all the same, but not quite the same since they were made by hand — and that's the only one which has survived. A photograph of his uncle, mother and father hung in the livingroom, just above the gun rack. Sober and unsmiling, they posed for the photographer in this same livingroom. His father and uncle built the house themselves. What was that one remaining chair made of — ash, maple, hickory? His father told him, but he couldn't remember now. Yet he could feel himself and his past in almost every corner, floor board and piece of furniture — furniture which had been his and Anna's.

There were late March winds playing against the window at the moment. Soon the snow would be completely melted from the flowerbeds, and the lawn would stretch long, narrow and green from the road to the front of the house. It was almost morning. Every morning Anna, his wife, had risen first; and when he could hear the clatter of the lids on the wood stove that had been in the kitchen most of their married life, she was lighting the fire to warm the house and start breakfast. Then he too would get

up and dress, ready for a cup of coffee before he did the morning milking. He did not think beyond the house because he had sold the barn and farmland ten years ago, shortly after Anna's death. Sometimes he would relive their entire daily routine. But what was most pleasant and conducive to sleep was lying on the front lawn in the soft grass, just where it sloped toward the house, while she sat in a white slant-back wooden lawn chair, knitting work socks for him or a sweater for herself. Everything was quiet except for the breeze which rustled the leaves in the elms his father had planted years before and the bees which droned over the summer flowers at the front of the house.

Henry sat in his lazyboy after lunch, not watching the television which seemed permanently on now. He would watch football, a documentary or the news. Alex has no goddamn taste at all, he thought — watches anything, even those stupid soaps. Since it was Sunday, there were no soaps, thank God. He looked across at Alex who was asleep on the sofa, and he thought of the chain he'd discovered on the refrigerator last night. Removed this morning — afraid somebody might see it. "Why doesn't he go to his goddamn bed to sleep?" Henry grumbled.

While Alex watched his soaps, Henry read magazines and the newspaper to keep up on local and national politics and issues. He ceased to wonder long ago that Alex limited and narrowed his mind. Newsweek lay open on Henry's lap, and his reading glasses had slipped to the tip of his nose.

Feeling his glasses being removed, he awoke with a start. He watched Alice return them to their case on the coffee table and put the magazine in the rack beside his chair. I can remove my own goddamn glasses, he said to himself, but his face showed no annoyance.

"How are you today, Daddy?" Alice asked, taking off her coat.

"Just fine. How are you, Brad? Getting the machinery ready for spring planting?"

"Oh, it's a little early for that, Henry. So far I'm just thinking about it. Looks like it'll be an early spring though. We could use that."

Alex woke, nodded to his sister and brother-in-law, stretched, and sat up on the sofa.

"Is there anything I can get you, Daddy?" Alice asked. "I baked you a chocolate cake."

"Just a glass of water," Henry replied. "Food's always so goddamn salty I never get enough to drink."

Henry could have gotten the water himself, but he

didn't want Alice to see how slowly he walked in case the nursing home idea was discussed again.

He remembered that day last fall, also a Sunday, when Alex, Alice and Bradley had persuaded him to visit George Gallagher in the Chesterton Nursing Home. Alice said the drive would be a pleasant change for him — get him out of the house.

After visiting George, they walked along the corridors, to look things over, Alex had said. The corridors were long and wide, and the thick beige carpet muffled their footsteps. They walked slowly for Henry's sake. Most doors were open and he noticed all the rooms were small, square and very white — a blank staring white, Henry concluded, stark white like the attendants' uniforms. Usually there were two people to a room. Some were asleep with their mouths open, but most sat in chairs or were propped in beds, staring blankly or curiously as they passed. The residents seemed a different shade of white to Henry, a sort of chicken flesh white of a just-plucked bird. Few moved about the halls that he could see. Thank God, he was still mobile and didn't need a cane or a walker. He quickened his pace as they moved toward the main entrance and shuffled several feet ahead of Alex, Bradley and Alice.

"What do you think of the place?" Alice asked.

"Very modern and clean. George said the food was really good — probably a lot better than Alex cooks. There's probably a lot of people you know here too, besides George."

Henry's response to Alice was a disapproving glare. Then he turned abruptly to address Bradley, a neutral third party whose judgment he valued. "Everyone's old in this place, goddamned near dead. You wouldn't see me moving into a place like this." He noticed Alice shrug and look at Alex as if to say I told you so.

The conversation in the livingroom turned to his grandchildren and great-grandchildren and blended with the droning of the television. I shouldn't have mentioned the salty food, Henry thought. That was a mistake. Alice'll be thinking of that good cooking in the nursing home.

He relaxed and let his eyelids close, draw down slowly like the blinds on the narrow farmhouse windows — the way people drew them down years ago. The way Anna had pulled them down when each of his parents died. Although it was not so much the custom when his son was killed in World War II, she lowered them then. And when Anna died, he lowered the blinds also, feeling she would have liked him to do so. He wondered if Alice would adhere to the old custom when he died. But he'd

not ask; she might think he was foolish.

He thought of earlier times, sunny Sunday afternoons when visitors arrived and there was no television. They sat about the front lawn near the flower-beds in the large slant-back white wooden lawn chairs and he and Bradley talked about the weather, gardens and crops as his grandchildren played in the yard.

Alex turned off the television. "It's put him to sleep," he said. "He should be in a nursing home. He can't take care of himself at all, he wanders around at night and goes to the fridge and spills things." He didn't mention the chain which was put on at night and removed in the morning. "He don't eat all his food, he just plays with it. He needs to be in a nursing home where he can receive professional care. And why the hell he don't go to bed, I don't know. He just sits sleeping all day in front of the television — just sleeps his life away."

Henry was not, however, asleep. He heard everything and could predict most of what would be said. He had perfected his feigned sleeping routine. He let his fingers twitch occasionally as if he were dreaming, sometimes he breathed more heavily, almost snoring, or slowly shifted his body, letting his head roll to the opposite side. Could have been a goddamn professional actor he

thought, but as he seemingly slept, there was no expression on his grave drawn face.

"It seems to me we've discussed all this before," Alice said.

"What do you think, Brad?" Alex asked. "Wouldn't he be better off where there was nurses?"

"Suit yourselves," Brad shrugged, "but you'd never get me in a nursing home. I'm going to stay home and work right to the end. Seems to me you just go downhill faster once you stop working and go into one of them places. Not as much desire to live any more."

Henry wanted to cheer, or at least smile. Bradley and he had always agreed on most things. But he kept his eyes closed and listened for his children's response.

"Well, as far as I'm concerned," Alice said, "we don't put him into a home until he absolutely has to go or wants to go."

Alice's response surprised Henry, who hadn't expected her to go against Alex so easily.

"That's okay for you," Alex complained, "but I'm the one who has to clean up his messes all the time. And he can hardly walk. You should see him."

"You don't have to do everything," Alice replied, showing a bit of her mother's zeal, it seemed to Henry. "There are homecare workers who'll come everyday and cook

and clean, and a V.O.N. who'll come and check him once a week. They'll even bring a walker, if he needs one."

"I'm not paying for anyone to come in here and muck around," Alex stated flatly.

"It wouldn't be you who paid," Alice cut in, her voice taking on a sharp edge. "It's Dad's money, not yours. All those services are free, government sponsored. He's paid taxes all his life, he's got as much right to them as anyone. They do everything for old people — their shopping, their banking, anything within reason. They even take them to the barbershop. Look at his hair! Looks as if it hasn't been cut in months. And my God, look at his clothes. There's food stains all over them in spite of your new washer and drier. What's more, this house is a pigsty. Why I'd be ashamed to have any of the neighbours dropping in. Ma'd roll over in her grave if she saw what it looked like."

"I don't want no damned strange women in here poking their fancy noses around," Alex snapped.

"Well, if you don't, you'd better start using the broom and mop a little more. The place's filthy."

Alice shook Henry's shoulder and he pretended to wake. "We're going now, Daddy," she said. "If you need anything, just phone."

As she put on her coat, she resumed a friendlier

tone with Alex. "By the way, the kids will all be home next Sunday, and I'm having sort of a family gathering — a big dinner at about one. I want you to come and bring Dad."

"Can't go. I'm already invited out." Alex winked at Bradley. "A lady friend, you know."

"No doubt you can't. I'll have Brad or one of the kids pick you up, Dad."

Alex said nothing once Bradley and Alice had left, and he avoided Henry, except for the occasional darting glare. Henry wondered if his son was feeling some guilt about Alice's accusations. Maybe his brooding meant some new pressure, but Henry couldn't imagine what this would be unless he refused to cook or get the water. He looked up at his son from time to time as he read, not too often though, or Alex might become suspicious that he had overheard part or all of the afternoon conversation. I have to be careful, Henry thought. I have to wait and see what he'll do.

Henry was under no illusion that Alex would sweep or mop the floor. He knew his son too well. If he refused to clean and tidy, at this point his refusal would be more stubbornness than laziness. Alex would not submit to any pressure from Alice. Above all, he would not be told what to do — always has been like that Henry

concluded. There's no use saying anything to him.

Since Henry found himself making only a pretence of reading, he closed his magazine, took off his glasses, and pushed his lazyboy back. He'd rest his eyes and maybe doze a little. Maybe he could, if he tried not to think of Alex.

Moments later, he heard the kitchen door close and then the car start. Alex was leaving, probably to spend the rest of the afternoon with his woman. "Might just as well live with her, move in with her," Henry grumbled. But then he thought of his own needs — he needed Alex to buy the groceries, cook and get the water. Oh, he knew Alex well. He'd be back. His desire to own the house would keep him there.

Henry was glad to have the house to himself, to be alone. Although he hated to agree with Alex, he, too didn't want a homecare worker fluttering about. He wondered how long she stayed each day — maybe just until she had the work finished. Then he'd have the house to himself again. He'd like to ask Alice, just to know, but asking might give Alice definite ideas about getting one. No, he'd better not ask.

Alex had left the television on. One good thing about Alex, he often left for the village, left Henry alone in the house. Like two old people alone, this

house and me, Henry mused. The feeling was warm, comforting and familiar — and mostly so when he was alone with the house.

As he shuffled slowly toward the television to turn it off, he thought of the silence he could now enjoy. His hand shook visibly as he turned the knob. I can walk, he thought, as long as I go slowly and think at the same pace as I want to walk. That's the trick, timing your thinking to your walking, then you won't fall. Once I get back to the chair, I can let my mind go faster.

As he settled into his chair, he thought of a comment Alice had made after that visit to George Gallagher. "You're lucky, Daddy, that you're just weak physically, just a bit arthritic. Look at poor George. So senile he didn't even know you. That'd be an awful way to end up." He must remember George's senility when he became discouraged about his own weakness and slowness. That would certainly help.

Although he closed his eyes and tried to relax, he could not conjure up images of Anna nor of summer flowers. The house creaked as the last of the March winds gusted off the open fields and rushed past her. It was the house's presence he felt most, as he reclined the lazyboy chair still further to a sleeping position and she seemed

to wrap herself about him, just like a soft old patch-work quilt, providing warmth against the sharp exterior winds.

Henry awoke to the sound of the kitchen door closing. He grabbed his newspaper and glasses in order to be seen reading as Alex entered the livingroom. Alex, however, stayed in the kitchen, and as Henry continued to read, the sounds of boiling and frying were the only indication Alex was present.

When he heard the plates on the table, he shuffled to the kitchen as briskly as he could. Just to let him know I'm not exactly an invalid yet, he thought.

The food was on the table. Henry looked at the one plate and decided to break the silence. "You not eating tonight?"

"No, Ella cooked for me." Henry did not miss the emphasis Alex gave to the word "Ella", insinuating that Alex had to cook for him.

"I'm going out. Told Ella I'd be back."

Henry ate the food slowly. Two pork chops, fried to a hard blackish crisp because the heat had been too high and boiled potatoes as salty as ever. He ate the chops, but left most of the potatoes. He wanted to finish them so that he'd not seem ungrateful and upset

Alex, but he didn't.

That night Henry was more thirsty than ever. His nocturnal wandering brought him again to the refrigerator. First he yanked the door and then the chain. Desperation parched and burned his mouth and throat. With sudden resolve, he shuffled quickly and angrily to the rifle rack on the livingroom wall. He took the lowest, his shot-gun, and cradling it in his arms, moved slowly and deliberately to the refrigerator door.

He tried to use the barrel as a crowbar to pry and break the chain. It was his goddamn refrigerator and he'd scratch it if he goddamn wanted to. He pulled and leaned with all his feeble strength, but the chain would not break.

Though his mind raged, he steadied his quavering body and withdrew the rifle. He moved slowly and cautiously toward a bottom drawer of the kitchen counter where odds and ends were kept — screwnails, string, light bulbs and, if he remembered correctly, a box of shot-gun shells. With great difficulty, he knelt and then sat on the floor, feeling the contents until he found the box in the littered drawer.

He sat on the floor and rested his back against the drawers. Think, he said to himself, slow down. Force

your fingers not to shake, not to drop a shell.

At the refrigerator once more, he placed the muzzle on the lock. Then he leaned against the refrigerator. Think, he repeated. The kick of the gun could knock you to the floor. Cautiously, he eased the rifle under his right arm so that both he and the rifle were leaning against the refrigerator, the muzzle still on the lock, and his finger on the trigger.

The blast shattered the night, and as the gun kicked, Henry let it fall to the floor. There was an immediate yell, curse and flurry of footsteps. Henry pulled the door open and grabbed the nearest container, a cardboard carton of milk.

Henry kept his eyes fixed on Alex whose mouth remained open. Alex said nothing. He stood there in the glare of the light from the open refrigerator door, staring, the colour drained from his face.

"No, I didn't shoot myself, although that probably would have lessened your troubles. Though I might have shot you!" Henry barked, intensifying his glare. "There'll be some big changes here come morning, when I phone Alice to take me to the lawyer. The power of attorney'll be hers, and if she doesn't want it, I'll ask Brad, or give it to the lawyer himself. She'll do it. There will be a homecare worker and a V.O.N. here

before the week's out, so you can stay or leave. It makes no difference to me."

Alex turned quickly and left. Henry could hear him ascend the creaking stairs and then saw the lights on the stairway go out.

Although his heart was pounding against his chest from the emotional strain and outburst, Henry felt good, relieved. Very slowly, but with a determined pace he left the kitchen, after having picked up the shot-gun, and turned on the livingroom lights.

As he moved across the livingroom, he used the rifle as a cane. Maybe that's what I need, he thought, a cane, not a walker. I'll have to ask Alice to get me one.

After he reached the rifle rack, he decided not to strain himself by replacing the shot-gun in the rack. He'd already exerted himself enough for one night. He'd use it for a cane to make his way back to his bed-dining-room. He wouldn't need it for protection against Alex whom he knew was too cowardly to cause him direct harm. But the shot-gun not being in the rack would make Alex uneasy, and that thought amused him.

His pulse rate was almost normal now, as he paused before the rifle rack. He looked at the faces in the old photograph. His uncle, his father and mother. So long ago. Such stern, unsmiling faces. But there was

also great determination and strength of will, and he wondered why he hadn't noticed that before. He thought of the stand he had made against Alex, and resolved to stick to it — not to retreat from his position.

Sleep might be more difficult tonight, he thought, as he eased himself into bed and pulled the chain on the porcelain lamp. But Henry's great sense of relief and satisfaction made sleep easier. Just before he slept, he imagined Anna and himself on the front lawn. He was stretched out, as he was now in bed, very comfortably. There were flowers stirring gently in the breeze, mid-summer flowers — delicate, white, yellow-eyed daisies — gladioli in red, mauve, pink, yellow, white ... the blooms open right to the tops of the long swaying stems ... and the colours were more vibrant than ever.

The Bogart Curse

"You phone him," Bradley told Willy, who had just returned from the hospital. "I was going to, but I waited for you. Your mother's not supposed to be improving. She is though, and I don't understand it. I thought you'd be better than me at talking to a doctor."

Willy realized his father would rather hear the facts indirectly. The doctor talked longer than Willy expected, and when Willy replaced the receiver, he relayed the good news first. Wendy and he were the only two of Alice's five children to inherit the spots (Von Rechlein's Disease was Dr. Crawford's term). The spots indicated the possible growth of benign tumours, but since they had no tumours before their mid-thirties, it was unlikely they would develop them, much less die from them." The pathologist reported Alice's tumours were benign, even though they appeared malignant. Dr. Crawford might let her come home for a few days, but only as a last wish. Her improvement was only temporary.

Bradley's eyes filled with tears and Willy's voice broke. "He says we shouldn't let her know we suspect she's dying, unless she wants to talk about it. He plans to leave her with some hope, but there is none."

Every afternoon since her operation, Willy and Wendy

visited their mother in the hospital, thinking each time might be the last. They were sure Alice knew the truth. She had sent Bradley's dark suit to the cleaners and ironed his white shirts a few days before entering the hospital. Willy hoped and feared his mother would admit she was dying. There were things he wanted to tell her. He wasn't quite sure what they were, but his desire for some ultimate, final intimacy was compelling.

He watched her now rousing herself from the morphine stupor. At sixty-five she didn't look old. Her skin was free of wrinkles and her light brown hair bore no traces of gray. As she ran her hand slowly, almost affectionately, over her distended stomach, he imagined the tumours twisting, invading all regions, growing stronger as she weakened. Liver-coloured octopi with long embracing tentacles. They encircled and squeezed vital organs, rendering them useless.

"Did you bring the chocolates?" she asked. Her mouth was dry and pasty. As he showed her the POT OF GOLD box, Wendy poured her a glass of water.

She'd reprimanded him on his first visit for bringing the yellow mums which sat with the other flowers on the window ledge. "Don't bring flowers! Flowers are for the dying. They're a waste of money. If you're bringing anything, bring chocolates for the nurses."

Grasping for a lie, he explained they were flowers which would last and she could plant them in the flower-bed.

Wendy returned the glass to the bed-side table and hung the clean night-gowns she'd brought in the closet. "What kind of night did you have, Mother?"

Alice ignored or didn't hear the question. "What day is it?" she asked, frowning and puzzled. "Now I know I'm all right, if I can just keep track of the days." She started counting them off slowly on her fingers before they could answer, much as a child does when learning numbers. "That's right. Today is Monday," she concluded, pleased at her success, "and I've been here for ... let me see ...." She cocked one eye, trying to recall. "For ten days, and the doctor says I can go home tomorrow if I keep improving. I took five steps by myself today," she announced proudly, "without even holding on to the bed."

Willy had already moved in with his father, but as she closed her eyes to rest, he and Wendy exchanged knowing glances from opposite sides of the bed. Both doubted the doctor would allow her to go home.

Alice opened her eyes and spoke slowly. "I didn't tell you this before, but Saturday night, I thought it all happened." She closed her eyes tightly for a moment, wincing at the memory.

"What do you mean 'it all happened'?" Willy asked calmly. He stood stiffly, not breathing, steeling himself for the impending disclosure.

"Oh, you know — everything." She raised her right hand and waved vaguely. "I thought at first it was all a nightmare — just the medicine, but the next day the nurses told me the doctor was here in the middle of the night. They must've called him. He's a surgeon and never on night shift. There's mostly just interns. Anyway it don't matter now. I've been much better ever since."

Willy turned the flowers in the window to ensure all sides received the same amount of sunlight, and Wendy fluffed the pillows.

The pallid old man who got out of his room again hesitated in the doorway, looking at them beseechingly. He was very tall, thin, and stooped. As usual, he wore only his white hospital gown and was in bare feet. "Help me! Somebody help me, please!" These were the only words he ever uttered as he regularly escaped the nurses.

"It'd be awful to be that bad off," Alice said, watching a nurse lead the gaunt man past the door and back to his room. "They're too kind to put a strait-jacket on him."

She pulled her sheet up until it was under her chin

and smoothed it with her hands. "You never know before an operation whether you'll ever wake up again. That's the scary part." She looked at them and smiled as if she knew something they didn't. "Do you know what I do, what it's like? Watch!". She took three deep breaths and held her nose on the final breath. "It's like a diver going under water. You just have to take three deep breaths and hope you'll come up. How many times I've gone through that over the past thirty years with each operation, I can't remember."

Willy could feel his eyes filling with tears, and turned to look out of the window, pretending something in the parking lot had caught his attention.

"You should write a story about it." He turned toward her, wondering if the "it" meant her death. "I liked the other stories, all about the past, the way things used to be, like the Waltons. They're as good as the Waltons."

"You mean the Walnuts," Willy joked, imitating his youngest brother.

"Well, that is what Allan used to call them. 'I guess we'd better watch the Walnuts' he'd say. But he never missed them, and when the show was finished, he'd say, 'Well, I guess that's it for the Walnuts for tonight.'

No," she insisted, almost pleading, "write about it. I don't mind. It'll make a good story. Why should I mind? Dr. Crawford takes pictures of my insides, writes it up in all the medical journals, and then tells me later. He knows I don't care as long as he don't use my real name. God knows how many people have seen pictures of my tumours! They're rare, you know. The Bogart Curse. I don't suppose he calls it that. Probably has some fancy medical name for it. But it's the Bogart Curse. It's from that side of the family."

She lowered the sheet and stretched out her arms to show the small coffee-coloured spots which resembled freckles. "The Bogart Curse! I've got more of them now than I've ever had. The only good thing about them is you know your tumours will never be malignant."

On her right palm Willy noticed three spots, and two on her left. These were a dark chocolate and like perfectly round beauty marks. They hadn't been there before she entered the hospital. He was about to draw her attention to them, but realizing she hadn't discovered them, he stopped himself in time. He was going to distract her by showing her his own. But just as he rolled up his sleeve, the two grandchildren entered.

They were the eldest grandchildren, Sandra's

daughter, Janice, and Wendy's son, Ronnie. They were also her favourites, since she'd been their babysitter while her daughters worked.

"You didn't have to come again today." She smiled, pleased they had. "I'm not dying, you know, and I'll be going home tomorrow."

"We can only stay a few minutes," Ronnie apologized. "We have to go to a Junior Farmers' meeting." Both looked tense, almost solemn, but they kept up a normal conversation.

Before they left, each went to the head of the bed and kissed their grandmother on the cheek. Alice looked embarrassed, but didn't say anything until they were gone. "They've been doing that since they were kids. They're the only ones who do. I've never got used to it though."

Willy realized he wanted to kiss and touch his mother, too, just once before she died, but he couldn't. He stood watching her, wondering if her attitude was also part of the Bogart Curse.

Wendy must have been reading his thoughts. She was sitting in the passenger's seat, blowing smoke rings and looking at the landscape. "She don't like to be touched, you know. She never has. And you never cry, no matter what! You hold it all inside."

She told him about pleading to go to the hospital when Alice's mother was dying. "I was only twelve, and in the hospital parking lot, I started snivelling. When we got out of the car, she took both my shoulders and shook me hard. 'Don't you dare cry in the hospital room!' she said. 'Don't you let on anything is wrong! If you can't control yourself, stay in the car!'"

"And I won't cry at the funeral," she added, looking at Willy resolutely. "Father won't either. She wouldn't want him to — he'll do his crying in private. Sandra'll cry for all get out — she never could control her tears. I won't though, and it'll be harder on me because I'm losing my mother and my best friend — we went everywhere together." She grinned for the first time that afternoon. "I guess it's the Bogart Curse." Then she turned to stare out of the window again.

Alice was lying on the sofa, supported by pillows so that she could eat from the tray he'd place on her lap. He chopped the lettuce and cold-cuts into postage stamp pieces, much as she must have cut his food when he was a baby. Roughage, she said, was what she needed to make her bowels move. It was her Thursday supper, and since she had declined in her three days at home, just as Dr. Crawford said she would, he knew this was her last day

in her home.

"I hope there's no visitors tonight," she said. "It'd be nice just to be by ourselves. You know the V.O.N. might put me back in the hospital in the morning. I haven't had a bowel movement for three days. I guess I'll have to tell her. She'll know what's right to do."

The sofa was near the sliding glass doors which provided a view of the creek at the end of the ploughed field. Dark cedars bordered the creek, and beyond and above them taller gray trees extended spectral arms toward the misty sky. In another week the branches would be obscured by delicate new leaves.

She stopped eating to gaze at the distant forest. Willy heard a car in the driveway and turned toward her. "You spoke too soon, Mother. Somebody's here." The door opened and Ronnie entered.

"Oh, that don't matter. Ronnie's not company."

She was holding her fork the wrong way now, stabbing futilely at the food with the handle. Willy wanted desperately to position the fork correctly, but he couldn't embarrass her. Instead, he sat helplessly and looked in Ronnie's direction. Ronnie, who had suddenly become pale because of the scene, excused himself, saying he had to get home to supper — he'd just stopped by for a moment on his way home from work.

When Willy looked at his mother again, she was slowly eating bits of food with her fingers. The fork lay where it had fallen on her blanket. "You can take this away now," she said. "I don't seem to have much appetite."

"I hope you're going to be able to eat the fresh strawberries I bought."

"Oh, no, you're spoiling me!" She was emotional, on the verge of tears. "They're so expensive this time of year."

"Don't be silly, Mother. They were only a dollar — it's only a half-pint box."

"Well, all right," she said, quickly regaining her composure. "I'll try them then."

He handed her a fork rather than a spoon from which they might roll. She held the fork uncertainly and made one awkward unsuccessful jab.

Willy hesitated, searching for the right words. "Why don't you let me spear them for you, Mom? It'd be a shame not to do them justice. And they may help bring on a bowel movement."

She stared at him for a moment, struck by the strange intimacy of his feeding her. But as she ate the berries, she relaxed. "They taste just like summer," she ventured. Then she looked at the distant trees and exclaimed loudly,

"I hope ... I hope I CRAP all the way from here to the forest and back again!"

"Mother, such language!" Willy scolded with mock prudishness.

They looked at the distance to the forest and burst into laughter.

It took two of them now to help Alice to the bathroom, one supporting her from behind and one in front. As Bradley steered her slowly back toward the bedroom, she stopped walking and closed her eyes. "I can't make it tonight. Put me on the sofa," she groaned. Bradley objected, saying she couldn't sleep there all night. But Willy flashed a warning look, indicating it was her last night at home.

"Well, maybe when you need to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night, we could move you into the bedroom," he conceded.

"I'll be all right there. I've spent lots of nights on the sofa when I was sick."

Willy had hardly begun to doze when he heard her calling. "I can't give you the morphine yet, Mom, not for another couple of hours."

"Oh, it's not that. Could you wash my legs with a

damp face cloth? I think they'd feel better." He hesitated, amazed she would ask.

Her legs were swollen twice their normal size, like two great tree trunks. He massaged, rather than washed them with the damp cloth. She exclaimed how much better they felt as he continued massaging and bending them longer than necessary.

"Are you going back to bed now?" she asked tentatively, as he stood up.

"No, I thought I'd have a cigarette first."

She offered to move in order to make room for him at the end of the sofa, but he told her not to — there was enough space already.

"The nurse may decide to put me back in the hospital tomorrow. I'll have to do what she says." She paused, gathering her thoughts. "You know, you all used to tease me about being tight with my money." She smoothed the blanket with her hands. "But it pays to be that way. I never had to depend on nobody, and could always pay my own way. It's good to be independent and secure. You got to put aside, because you never know what this world will come to. You have to provide for your future."

"You should spend more of your money on yourself, instead of saving it for us. Buy a fur coat! You've never had one. Nobody's going to need your money."

"Oh, I never wanted a fur coat. I always thought they were a waste of money when there's so many good wool ones. I've got money, you know. Now I can't add it up because of the medicine, but I can remember the amounts. I'll tell you how much and you add for me."

She quoted figures in her long term savings, current account, and bonds. Then she smiled, content with the total. "Who'd ever have thought, years ago, when we were so poor, that someday I'd be worth that much!"

Relaxed and silent, she looked out of the window toward the distant creek and cedar forest which were now obscured by darkness. He rose to close the sliding glass door, but she said softly, "No, leave it open. I want to hear and feel the night. It's so peaceful and quiet, I think I could stay here forever." For a while they stared into the darkness.

At last she spoke. "You'd better go to bed now and get some sleep. I'll probably be calling out for medicine in a couple of hours, but I'll hold out as long as I can."

"No, you call as soon as you need it. Don't wait until the pains are bad. You know," he lied, "I can fall asleep again right away. You go to sleep now too."

"Well, not right away. I may just enjoy the night a while longer."

Feeling she wanted to be alone, he walked past her and touched her hand lightly. He could have bent to kiss her as she lay, staring wistfully into the darkness, but he didn't.

Having opened his bedroom window wide, he stretched out on the bed but couldn't sleep, for the spring air and the intimacy of the evening kept flooding over him.

Changing Partners

Willy cranked the hospital bed higher to prop his mother into a sitting position. Then he watered the flowers on the window ledge while his sister combed their mother's hair.

"The nurses don't have time for that," Alice said, pointing weakly at the flowers, excusing her nurses for what her children might consider neglect. "They haven't brought my supper yet, but I guess they will soon. I have no appetite anyway."

"It's the morphine," Willy explained. "It's a drug that takes the appetite away."

"Where did you eat?" she asked casually.

"With Wendy. She had supper ready early so we could come and sit with you while you eat."

Alice stiffened, her hazy, glazed eyes suddenly focussed sharply, and her voice became shrill with accusation. "You could have eaten with your father. He can cook, you know. There's lots of food in the house. Don't you leave your father alone!"

Willy looked at her, shocked and speechless for a moment as her voice rose with the final command. By "alone" she meant right then, while she was in the hospital, but also after she had died. She wouldn't admit she was dying, she maintained that she was going

home soon, and everyone kept up her illusion. The veiled reprimand was the closest she'd come to admitting the truth.

He wanted to ask how she could possibly imagine Wendy and he would desert Bradley once she had died — just pay him token visits as children often do. He wanted to answer her rebuke in kind, as he would have done at home.

Instead, he explained he hadn't wanted to bother his father with extra cooking and he was staying there at night now anyway. Since his new school was closer to the farm than his city townhouse, he'd stay at the farm during the week from now on and return to the city only on the weekends. He'd save on gas and he'd have more time for lesson preparation and marking.

"Well, it'll be much nicer going home, if you're there to cook." She looked more relaxed, satisfied she'd taken care of her husband's future. "I don't think I could stand eating his cooking until I'm up and about. He overcooks everything, cooks everything on high temperature — fries the meat until it's hard and black, tough as old shoe leather." She grew suddenly furious with Bradley. "I bet he's eating all the best steaks. There'll be nothing left in that freezer except hamburger, soup bones and stewing meat."

Wendy came to her father's defence. "I went there this morning to clean the house, but there was nothing to do. You should see how neat and clean he's keeping the place."

"Oh, is he?" She smiled, surprised and pleased. "That's good. I can't stand a messy and dirty house. He comes to see me every afternoon, you know, sometimes twice a day."

"You could see your face in the kitchen floor it was so shiny."

Alice looked content and submitted once more to the effects of the morphine.

"Lower the bed, so I can rest a bit before the nurse brings supper."

* * *

Bradley was recounting his shopping trip to the city with Wendy, and Willy sat listening, amazed his father had gone. He had never shown an interest in Alice and Wendy's shopping excursions.

"I went more or less to get out of the house. There's nothing much to do here after the chores are finished. If it was summer, it'd be different. We've been going once a week. I always pay for her lunch and slip her twenty dollars to help with the shopping. That's what your mother used to do. It makes up for

Wendy's gas and helps her out a little."

Bradley was silent for a moment. "You know, when she came this morning, I was down on my knees washing the kitchen floor, just for something to do. It wasn't that dirty. And just before she came in, I felt as if Alice was standing over me, watching. Sometimes I can almost hear her saying, 'Don't do it that way! That's not right!'"

Willy stood in the kitchen cooking supper while his father did the chores. Sometimes he felt his mother watching over him also. He imagined her lying on the sofa before an operation, weighted down by tumours, unable to stand on her swollen legs, or after an operation, too weak to walk yet. He'd been twelve the first time, and several times during the preparation of the meal, he'd go into the livingroom where she lay for instruction. Sometimes just to make her feel needed.

"Everybody should learn how to cook," she'd explain. "You never know when it'll come in handy. My mother never showed me a thing, and when I got married, I couldn't boil water." Willy looked over his shoulder toward the livingroom, half expecting her to be lying there.

The supper had been cooked for a half an hour, and his father, who was usually prompt, hurrying the pre-milking chores to sit and talk with him after being alone all day, was late. Looking out the kitchen window and across the highway at the barn, Willy noticed a large old red truck parked near the barn. His mother would have been upset at the delay. The food would be ruined, she'd say, all dried up.

To pass the time, he poured himself a cup of tea, wondering if the mug he was using, the NO EATING ON THE JOB mug, had been hers. He stubbed his cigarette in an ashtray which said GOD BLESS OUR LOUSY KITCHEN. It was a cheap white porcelain ashtray with a gold line around the outer edge and bold black lettering in the centre. Something she found amusing. He smiled, but stopped abruptly when he read the top of the plastic container he was putting in the sink. Peas, it said in writing that was hers, writing not unlike his own. She must have been in a hurry freezing the peas that day because the masking tape had been torn from the roll, not cut with scissors. Her peas were on the stove now, cooked. He was tempted to pull the tape off the container, but he didn't. Instead he ran his finger slowly over it, noticing that it held fast to the plastic.

The red truck had been parked in the driveway in front of the kitchen window for almost an hour, and the three men inside were passing a bottle back and forth. It was a cattle drover's truck, and whatever deal the two men had made with his father was being celebrated. He looked at the stove. Everything had been turned to low heat, but the porkchops had become dry and the peas looked more shrivelled than ever. His mother would have been furious at this point, wanting to knock on the window to get her husband's attention.

"Like a bunch of teenagers," she'd say, "sitting in a truck, passing a bottle back and forth, getting three sheets to the wind for no reason at all."

As the door opened and the three came inside, Willy felt his mother's anger rising unwillingly in him. She'd probably take her tea mug and go into the livingroom, leaving them alone in the kitchen. Willy had the mug in his hand now. He was supposed to be upset. His father'd expect him to be.

Bradley's step was unsteady, and he grinned sheepishly, boyishly. Willy didn't say anything. His mother would have given Bradley, all three of them, the cold shoulder, and he felt the impulse rising, mastering him.

"We was just celebrating this deal and the bottle run dry. I think there's one in the cupboard. It's my

turn to treat. How about getting us some glasses?"

Bradley turned to introduce his friends. "This here's McGillivray and the other fella's a drover too, Maureen McTeer's uncle. Ain't everyday you get such distinguished company, a Prime Minister's uncle, in your house." He laughed and winked.

"Have a chair, fellas. This is Willy. I got other sons, but he's the smartest and the favourite." He paused a moment, slightly embarrassed at his words. "We sort of look after each other," he added. "He's the one I been telling you about. I watch him while he does the cooking so I can learn better myself. He can even speak French."

"Maureen does too," the uncle said, "even better than Joe. You learned yours like Joe, didn't you, after you were grown up?"

Willy set the mug on the counter and reached into the cupboard for the three glasses. He hesitated, and then took a fourth for himself.